

# Anesthetic Criticism and the Economy of Lifedeath: The *Odyssey* and the Akedah

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**Abstract:** The hermeneutic principles of the *Odyssey* and the narrative of Abraham and Isaac—the texts from which Auerbach derives *the* representational program of western literature—illustrate how the aesthetic harbors an anesthetizing power that is ineliminable from human existence, hence from human perception, cognition, and affect. A criticism attentive to the anesthetic deepens the understanding of the evolutionary economy—an economy of lifedeath—within which our species, our cognition, and the products of our cognition have emerged, their adaptive value inherently unable to ensure our survival into the possible futures, which we cannot know we are setting in motion.

*Keywords:* anesthetics, economy, lifedeath, *Odyssey*, Akedah

“Politics and political economy . . . are implicated in every discourse on art and on the beautiful.”

—Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” 3.

“Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead being, and a very rare type.”

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, §109.

“To lose itself all by itself, to go down on its own, to autoimmunize itself, as I would prefer to say in order to designate this strange illogical logic by which a living being can spontaneously destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other, to immunize it against the aggressive intrusion of the other.”

—Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, 123.

## 1. Introduction

By anesthetic criticism I mean a meta-hermeneutic investigation of hermeneutics in a world in which *existence costs*—that is, in which the difference between gain and loss, indebtedness and freedom from the past, life and death is necessarily and inescapably undecidable in relation to the unknown future that any decision in the present might inaugurate; and therefore also in relation to the infinitude of possible futures that are absolutely lost by virtue of any decision, which instantly entails the loss of this lost.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, by anesthetic criticism I mean a critical inspection of those interpretive programs that rationalize the violence that is inextricable from the evolutionary success of *Homo sapiens*; to that end that presuppose and privilege the capacity of human consciousness to unify and harmonize the diversity of its activities—economic, political, ethical, religious, artistic, and so on—without sufficiently acknowledging, or acknowledging at all, the inevitable costliness of this capacity, or by presuming that they can convert the violence of these costs into

determinable gains with minimal or no determinable loss; and that thereby aestheticize humankind's reflexivity while failing to account for the anesthetizing power of such idealization.<sup>2</sup>

Why would our species have evolved a consciousness that is prone to anesthetizing itself, and to doing so by concealing its awareness of its self-numbing within what is felt to be its consciousness-intensifying aesthetic productions? Having supplanted all other species in the *Homo* genus, humankind has long been a menace to itself; indeed, in our dependency on one another, and therefore in our susceptibility to betrayal by our own kind, "we," who are paradoxically not yet what this pronoun appears to signify, are at risk of destroying and being destroyed by those *we* regard as *not us* yet who perceive *us* likewise as *not the us* that they take themselves to be.<sup>3</sup>

My argument is not that the aesthetic *is* a ruse of a false or self-falsifying consciousness, not that it *is* a psychological defense, not that it *is* truth relativizing, for any such totalizing declarative predication would be self-contradictory insofar as it would tacitly exclude itself from its claim even as the claim would nevertheless include it. Rather, my argument is that the aesthetic harbors an anesthetizing power that is ineliminable from human existence, hence from human perception, cognition, and affect. In other words, the anesthetic is inseparable from the aesthetic—essential to and yet threatening of it, neither term designating the opposability that it seems to name.<sup>4</sup>

I shall support this argument by analyzing how the hermeneutic principles of the *Odyssey* and the narrative of Abraham and Isaac—the texts from which Erich Auerbach famously derives the fundamental representational program of western literature—encode the force of the anesthetic within its aesthetic protocols. I believe that a criticism attentive to the anesthetic deepens the understanding of the evolutionary economy—as an economy not of life but of lifedeath—within which our species, our cognition, and the products of our cognition, have emerged presumably because of their adaptive value, such value being inherently unable to ensure our survival into the possible futures, which we cannot know in any given present moment of awareness that we are setting in motion.

## 2. Poetic Justice: Odysseus's Revenge (An)esthetically Sanctified

In his canonical study *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach begins by contrasting two stylistic programs that have recurred throughout the history of "the representation of reality in western literature," in the words of his subtitle. One is typified by the *Odyssey*—by "the *need* of the Homeric style to leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized" (5; my emphasis). Auerbach does not locate this "need" in Homer's entreaty that the Muse "Sing in me . . . and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending . . ." (*Odyssey*, ll. 1–2). Nor does he derive this "need" from the content of this story—neither from the actions of Odysseus (he raids and plunders on his way back to Ithaka where, of course, he slaughters the suitors, the brothers and sons of the people over which he rules as king), nor from his character. Why is it, then, that "the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present"? (Auerbach 7). The reason why Auerbach declares that "the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret meaning" (13), is that every aspect of the hero's journey back to his island kingdom of Ithaka to reunite with his family takes place in the Zeus-ordained and foregrounded moral ordering of the cosmos, which this Father-god announces in his "bright hall . . . upon Olympos," divine counterpart to Odysseus's house, where "the other gods were all at home,"<sup>5</sup> when he summarizes his law of crime and punishment: "See how Aigisthos [the lover and co-conspirator of Clytemnestra] . . . stole Agamemnon's wife and killed the soldier on his homecoming day. And yet Aigisthos knew that his own doom lay in this. We gods had warned him. . . . Now he has paid the reckoning in full" (1: 52–62). Here, in full view and hearing of all the Olympian gods—the scene rendered in the epic's characteristic style of "fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings . . ." (Auerbach, 23)—Zeus anticipates and justifies the terrible penalty that Odysseus will deliver to the suitors in the "halls" (21: 133, 22: 535) of his own home. And yet it is just this foreshadowing judgment that Zeus

repudiates in the final lines of the poem when, without explanation, he not only imposes a limit to the revenge he will permit Odysseus to exact from the Suitors but also rhetorically all but erases the hero, thereby revealing what up until this moment has been anesthesically concealed as an aestheticizing moral idealization of Odysseus. How so?

Elsewhere, I have explained in detail how Odysseus is repeatedly associated with the god-signs of Zeus.<sup>6</sup> When Athena beseeches Zeus to allow Odysseus to finally return home, Zeus himself says of “that kingly man” that “there is no mortal half so wise; no mortal gave so much to the lords of open sky” (1.87–88). Accordingly, in her various guises Athena assures Odysseus that Zeus has accepted his unstinting sacrifices and the righteousness of his fury against the Suitors. Not, however, at the epic’s very end. At the climax of the battle against the brothers, sons, and allies of the slain Suitors, Odysseus is so enraged that he and Telemakos “would have cut the enemy down to the last man, leaving not one survivor had not Athena raised a shout that stopped all fighters in their tracks” and commanded them to “end your bloodshed, Ithakans, and make peace” (24: 588–593). The designation “Ithakans” names everyone, of course, including Odysseus. However, unlike his enemies, who are terrified at “the great voice of the goddess” (24: 597) and who turn and flee for their lives, Odysseus is all the more incited: he lets out “a cry to freeze their hearts, and ruffling like an eagle on the pounce . . . reared himself to follow,” the completion of his vengeance likened to an act of avian—non-human—predation, which the previous instance of this simile sanctifies as sent by the Olympian god of gods. It is at just this moment, however, that Zeus himself intervenes, “dropp[ing] his thunderbolt smoking at his daughter’s feet” (24: 602–603). Why at Athena’s feet and not at the hero’s? Why does the Father-god threaten his daughter with a force that directly hitting Odysseus would have obliterated him, and why in full view of Odysseus? The answer discloses the anesthetic function of the poem’s mythic form as a heroic quest to re-found the communal basis of Ithakan society, which, after twenty years of being leaderless, is on the verge of a suicidal war with itself. Rather than reestablish a kingdom-wide peace, cooperation, and commitment to the common good, however, Odysseus is about to decimate the social order in the name of his desire for “full payment,” until this moment the thematic heart of the tale and the representational goal of its signature style. If, after 12,000 lines of supporting Odysseus’s vengeance, Zeus stops the homecoming king’s reckoning, if he now inexplicably arrests Odysseus at the peak of his rage, if he now fully isolates the Ithakan ruler in the instant of his most intense savagery, it is because the poem reinterprets itself through a new conception of Zeus—of his justice and its economy. And so it is that, in order not to kill Odysseus, Zeus forces him to surrender who he has been, to exchange his polytropic resourcefulness<sup>7</sup> in the service of what has appeared to be heroic retribution for becoming an unnamed signatory, one of two “parties,” any difference between Odysseus and the other Ithakans now erased, to “terms of peace.”

When Auerbach claims that “Homer can be analyzed . . . but he cannot be interpreted” (Auerbach, 13), he misses the secret that the *Odyssey* keeps from itself, aided and abetted by a tradition of commentary that has not recognized the infanticidal meaning of the decimation that Odysseus visits upon the Suitors, and of the like obliteration that Zeus stops himself from unleashing upon his daughter as well as the one whose vengeance the poem has previously divinized. Only in its final lines does the epic begin to awaken from the anesthetizing aestheticization of the hero’s violence.

In this interpretation, the end of the Book 24 provides a privileged perspective from which to examine the anesthetic features of the Homeric style in action. I have previously traced how these features, without specifying them as anesthetizing, encode the infanticidal meaning of Odysseus’s name and his actions throughout the epic.<sup>8</sup> Here, I want to look briefly at how the poem explicitly aestheticizes this violence just before the hero mows down<sup>9</sup> the Suitors only to have his military victory, the future he had imagined would come from it, and his idealization of his vengeance interrupted and repudiated by Zeus.

In Book 21, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, has revealed himself to his faithful wife, who keeps the secret of his identity and his plans for executing his revenge against the Suitors. Following his

instruction, she retrieves his bow from storage, her Athena-prompted self-talk externalized: “Now try those dogs at archery,” she says to herself, “to usher bloody slaughter in” (21.4–5). She is furious, for the Suitors have violated the foundational principle of Greek sociality—the reciprocal obligations of guests and hosts—by feasting at the expense of the king’s household and neglecting the ritual of sacrificial meat offerings to the gods. However, before continuing with what happens next in the chronology of events—the battle during which Odysseus, his son, his father, and his loyal servants destroy the Suitors—the narrative pauses the action to explain the violent, indeed infanticidal, history of the bow. It does so according to the epic’s aesthetic principle of compositional foregrounding—interrupting chronology to leave nothing unexplained in an unilluminated background.

The history of the bow centers on an unpaid debt of 300 sheep and their shepherds, stolen from Ithaka by Messenians “in the old time” (21: 14). At some point the Ithakan elders, along with Odysseus’s father, send Odysseus to collect what they are owed. When Odysseus arrives in Pherai, he meets and befriends Iphitos, himself on a similar mission to recover 12 mares and their mule colts. Iphitos is an archer son of Eurytos, also an archer. When Odysseus leaves, Iphitos gives his now symbolic brother the bow his dying father had given him. “In fellowship Odysseus gave a lance and a sharp sword. But Herakles killed Iphitos before one friend could play host to the other” (21.35–37). To honor the memory of Iphitos, Odysseus does not take the bow to the war at Troy but safeguards this hunting and military weapon, now redesignated as a peaceable “keepsake,” where “it served him well at home in Ithaka” (21.40–41). Just how this token of friendship has “served” Odysseus is never disclosed. How it will serve him is about to be, for when the narrative returns to the present action, the bow, transferred from father to son and son to guest, will become the means by which a deferred and displaced revenge in the name of a multiple filial imperative—friend avenging his friend and thus restituting the honor of the murdered friend’s patrilineage—is finally accomplished, its destiny fulfilled. When Penelope retrieves this gift from storage, where it has been as if hidden and unused, she presages how Odysseus, bow in hand, prepares to emerge from his hiding as a beggar to claim his identity and to settle not only his own accounts but those associated with the history of the bow, these to be retrospectively sacralized by the restoration of Odysseus’s kingship.

The bow, however, is not simply Odysseus’s possession. Although it is an extension of Odysseus—of his training as a hunter and warrior, of his plundering, and of his vengeance against the Suitors—it is also the case that he is an extension of the bow and its meaning as a signifier (specifically a synecdoche) of the ancient Greek world’s symbolic order and its vulnerability to the auto-immunitary risk that its sacralization of vengeance produces and rationalizes as retributive justice. The risk in question is inseparable from the economy of reciprocal obligations, which requires peace-respecting observance of the guest–host relation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, vengeance against anyone who is perceived to have compromised or to be presently traducing this relation, even when the very act of retribution is categorically indistinguishable from the trespass, crime, or debt that motivates it.

From the outset, the Homeric narrative conceals this similitude if not identity of retributive justice and the malefaction it reproduces. In the opening two books, for example, the difference between the revenge that Odysseus seeks and the apparent profanity of the Suitors is not a straightforward matter of principle (the noble family of an exceptional warrior versus the execrable kinsmen who have besmirched the guest–host protocols) but of military force, the lethality and societal destructiveness of which, as noted above, Zeus does not interdict until the very end when he withdraws his sacralizing authorization of Athena’s support for Odysseus’s vengeance. Indeed, in the first two books, the narrative hints at but does not otherwise address the implications of the collective anxiety and rivalry that have overtaken the kingdom as well as Odysseus’s own household as a result of the king’s twenty-year absence and the danger but also the opportunity that his death announces. If, as Telemakhos acknowledges, his father likely has not survived, this son is at risk of losing his inheritance as well as the kingship should his mother, the queen, remarry. For her part Penelope has

for three years pretended that she believes her husband has died, declaring to all of Ithaka that she will choose one of the Suitors after she finishes weaving a funeral shroud for her still-living father-in-law. When the Suitors discover her deception, the narrative notes their grievance against the queen but includes nothing about the legitimacy of their anger at the queen herself for having made a false promise. Instead, the narrative turns to and affirms the helpless rage of Telemakhos at how the Suitors have desecrated the guest-host relation, “squandering” and “plundering” its “treasure and livestock” (2.62, 69, and 80–81), which he has expected to inherit. The narrative is likewise silent about how Penelope’s “cunning” has put her son in a precarious bind: too young and inexperienced to handle the Suitors, he must nevertheless protect the household from the conflict between the palace and the Ithakans, a conflict his mother has intensified by declaring her widowhood and thus announcing her availability to those who seek her hand and the throne, as they must in order to secure the succession that the island kingdom needs. Idealization, sacralization, aestheticization, rationalization, justification—all are names for the anesthetic effect of the Homeric poetic vision. All are forms of the stylistic techniques by which the narrative represents the force of the hero as divinely sanctioned, the hero’s furious assault on his own people as retributive justice, and his quest for total victory over his enemies as the will of the god of gods.

The gift of the bow embodies this anesthesia and simultaneously veils this embodiment by representing it in language that links its aesthetic qualities to the ethical meaning of its use, thereby attempting to idealize and transcendentalize the ideology of vengeance.

The use of the bow—the use that Iphitos and then Odysseus make of it and the use that the bow makes of the two friends, joining them in a bond of friendship that becomes a posthumous military alliance—is both the cause and the consequence of the crisis of the Girardian reciprocal violence<sup>10</sup> that results from this double use. In the *Odyssey*’s human-generated societal disaster, what has previously bound the Ithakans in common—trust, friendship, courtship and marriage, honor, observance of the protocols governing and safeguarding the guest-host relation, scrupulous performance of the rituals due the gods, and so on—has disintegrated. The divided community has found itself in interpretive conflict, each side so inflamed in its grievances against the other that in their desire to get even they are indistinguishable, their differences subsumed by their identical aim to emerge victorious at the cost of the lives of their once friends, now enemies.

The Homeric narrative, however, insists on siding with Odysseus, at least until the surprise of its final lines, when Zeus checks himself from obliterating Odysseus—that is, when Zeus transforms his signature power of death into a sign of the accord that neither Odysseus nor his Ithakan opponents can achieve on their own. Until then, the narrative attempts to distinguish Odysseus (as heroic son, father, husband, and king) from the Suitors (as defilers of what has previously been the city-state’s community-binding customs) by assigning to its presumptive hero a weapon that has been sanctified and hence transcendently aestheticized while withholding any such consecration of the like weaponry of those he slaughters, whose swords and bows, like the suitors themselves, are depicted as ineffectual in saving them from the consequences of having profaned Odysseus’s home.

And yet this idealization of the gift of the bow is precarious. On the one hand, the narrative imbues Odysseus’s bow—the bow itself, the history of the bow, and the giving of it—with the highest and purest of values. On the other hand, however, fidelity to this gift indebts the one who is given it—indebts the recipient to the past as the blessing of a friendship that at the time of the giving is a contract of peace. Given in trust, the bow is not what it literally is—a means of killing—but a symbol of the life safeguarded by the reciprocal “fellowship” of metaphorical brothers (21.35). In the *Odyssey*, this principle invests revenge, in the name of the friend who has been killed by enemies, with the meaning of preserving the friend’s memory, the friend’s symbolic life, a meaning implicit in the initial gift. When he uses the bow to kill the Suitors, however, Odysseus reveals the bow’s symbolic power as a curse—the curse that is intrinsic to the structure of an accord that makes revenge obligatory, since every such act is always at risk of eliciting a further act of revenge in response, identically



a curse perceived as a sacred duty. The entire aesthetic program of the Homeric style is to justify, self-contradictorily, the sacralization of Odysseus's revenge but not that of the Suitors and their allies, on the one hand, and yet, on the other hand, revenge as such as an expression of his world's social-cum-religious ideology. That is why the epic must protect itself from recognizing the meaning of the peace accord that Zeus decrees all sides must sign—that revenge implicates hero and enemy in the same mystification of their shared sacrificial orientation.

No wonder, then, that “the man skilled in all ways of contending” (21.460) mirrors the Homeric narrative's ultimate skill—sacralizing his weapon as an aesthetic instrument. Thus it is that when Odysseus “effortlessly . . . strung the bow, then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it, so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang a swallow's note” (21.466–470). The Suitors momentarily silenced, “Zeus thundered overhead, one loud crack for a sign” (21.471–472). Thereafter Odysseus shoots his arrow through twenty-four socket rings—they have been set up as a test among the Suitors, the winner to wed Penelope—as if his unerring aim were the Zeus's signal for the song of slaughter begin.<sup>11</sup> At this moment of triumph, Odysseus has no inkling that the next thundering sign from Zeus will bear a far different meaning about the nature of his desire.

No wonder, too, that the epic does not broach the reason for the advent of a new kind of meaning to Zeus's signals. No such inquiry, let alone explanatory engagement, is imaginable from within the epic—only a narrated declaration of the bare fact of Zeus's irresistible but unaccounted for self-manifestation, fully externalized, interrupting the action to announce *that* there must and will be a peace beyond the satisfaction of the desire to get even. And yet the ending thereby inscribes the decisive force of Zeus's command to stop fighting within the epic's indication of a potentially transformative apprehension, which its identification with Odysseus conceals in the open: those who sacralize their quest for revenge—everyone in the poem—remain enclosed in a profane order, rationalizing and aestheticizing their violence as the means of instituting what they mistakenly believe to be the justice of the Father-god, hence as this very justice; and therefore likewise remain anesthetically unable to recognize the absolute cost and irremediable loss, hence the inescapable injustice, of this supposed justice. It is a blindness to injustice that Zeus wishes Odysseus to see in the death that the lightning bolt does not deliver: hurled at Athena's feet, the flashing force of Zeus protects the hero from an extinction this mortal does not know is the meaning of his vengeance.

The injustice of justice is a provisional name for the evolutionary economy as an economy of livedeath. Unlike the *Odyssey*, which is unable to countenance this economy until its final lines, the entirety of the narrative that embodies the second Auerbachian mode of mimesis, the second aesthetic style—the account of Abraham's “binding” of his son, the Akedah, in preparation to sacrifice him as God has commanded—dramatizes this economy with a directness so appalling that it has provoked in reaction an entire tradition of self-protective, self-idealizing, and self-anesthetizing commentary.

### 3. As the Smoke Rises from the Altar: The Threat that No Generational Blessing Can Economize

In contrast to the *Odyssey*'s mimesis, the Old Testament's representation of reality entails “entirely different ways of developing conflict.” In its stories “the peace of daily life in the house, in the fields, and among the flocks, is undermined by jealousy over election and the promise of a blessing, and complications arise which would be utterly incomprehensible to the Homeric heroes. The latter must have palpable and clearly expressible reasons for their conflicts and enmities, and these work themselves out in free battles; whereas, with the former, the perpetually smouldering jealousy and the connection between the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessing and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison” (Auerbach 22). Such conflict remains mythological in Homer but “universal-historical” in the Bible (Auerbach 23). The Homeric crisis of kingdom-riving violence is summarily resolved by the direct interven-

tion of Zeus, whose “terms of peace” designate nothing of how the Ithakans achieve a cessation of their civil war, nothing of how they negotiate their past grievances, and thus nothing about the future of their kingdom. Not so in the Old Testament, “the religious intent” of which “involves an absolute claim to historical truth” (Auerbach 14). The conflicts it describes are events the repercussions of which affect the present and will reverberate in a future that, belief in its eschatological trajectory notwithstanding, remains deeply uncertain, problematic, anxiety arousing, and demanding of interpretation, the very need for which is in tension with the surety of its covenantal promise.

Although he does not analyze this tension, Auerbach implicitly locates it in the manner of the Akedah’s narration—in the way the story of Abraham’s obedience to God’s harrowing call to sacrifice his son makes use of a range of culturally foundational stylistic features that delimit a contrasting mimetic program to that of the *Odyssey* and that express an apprehension Homer does not have about the economy of human life. In Homer, the future that Odysseus seeks is a return to a previous time, the return coinciding with the seeming completion of a revenge that, acknowledged by no one in the epic, harbors the surprise of always being able to ignite the same desire to get even in turn. Until Zeus intercedes at the end to stop this baleful repetition, the kingdom is imprisoned in the reciprocal hatred that closes off everyone alike from an emotional transformation of which they cannot conceive. Paradoxically, the ideology of revenge anesthetizes the world of the *Odyssey*, whose iconic poet aestheticizes heroic violence. When Zeus finally intervenes, this world has a chance to imagine a new affective basis for peace. The poem names but does not develop the opportunity it introduces. Homer’s Zeus offers no promise of what is to come with peace nor any indication of how it is that the Greeks can achieve it. In sharp contrast, the future anticipated throughout the Old Testament is not a time when one avenger will defeat another once and for all, when one party feels justified in their vengeance by the ruin of their enemy, the perspective of the enemy dismissed. Rather, the future is the transcendental telos of the “the last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end,” before which “everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence” by the difficult and rigorous work of interpretation, which is inescapably provisional because subject to the necessary revisions that new, unanticipated, or unimaginable turns of events call for. These developments, by which the future is initially perceived as disturbing or even breaking with the projected salvific trajectory of the Covenant, “must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan,” the “fitting” resulting in a complex history of hermeneutic endeavors (Auerbach 16). As Auerbach goes on to explain, “the claim of the Old Testament stories to represent universal history, their insistent relation—a relation constantly redefined by conflict—to a single and hidden God, who yet shows himself and who guides universal history by promise and exaction, gives these stories an entirely different perspective from any the Homeric poems can possess” (Auerbach 16–17). That perspective is conveyed stylistically by a manner of presentation devoid of detail about the physical world other than what is necessary to situate the psychological orientations, moral circumstances, and spiritual challenges of those named, the mimetic purposes that this style serves. Apart from its exceedingly sparse detail, “all else” is unmentioned, unexternalized, “left in obscurity.” In other words, “the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal. . . , remains mysterious and fraught with background” (Auerbach 11–12).

What Auerbach regards as “mysterious,” however, is the result of an interpretive method that anesthetizes the narrative’s meaning by aestheticizing it. Calling this method into question, I am arguing that the Auerbachian “background” is, in fact, the locus of the Akedah narrative’s effort to teach its readers how to escape the allure, unrecognized as anesthetic, of interpretations that attempt to read the “binding” of Isaac aesthetically. Such interpretations (i) strain to rationalize the ethically appalling nature both of the ordeal to which God subjects Abraham and of God’s instrumental use of

the son as the means of testing the father; (ii) they derive the narrative's seeming teleological coherence from the blessing Abraham receives, as if this blessing were already announced in the otherwise unbearably threatening call that Abraham initially hears, as if this blessing could retroactively relieve Abraham of the horror he must commit, including the anticipation of his son's likely terror, and as if the blessing rendered God's motivations and purposes understandable from the outset, and not only acceptable but celebratory as the epitome of his life-bestowing power; (iii) they presuppose that the figurative language in which the blessing is announced is referentially transparent, hence readable; and (iv) they therefore resolutely ignore or explain away or otherwise fail to keep faith with the text's intimation that there is no outside of sacrifice. Against this aestheticizing hermeneutic quest to save the Akedah from its shocking implications, the text's own implicit hermeneutic operations resist all interpretations that numb themselves to the contrary meaning of the narrative background.

As noted, Auerbach reads these interpretive operations through a category—"background"—that is neither descriptive nor analytic but rather is a placeholding term for a worldview binding Abraham's literal and symbolic descendants to the unknown future responsibilities and choices with which their Covenant with God will confront them. Auerbach invokes this "background," with its indefinite existential challenges to come, to designate the kind of empirical (sensory, perceptual, behavioral, cognitive, and affective) detail that Homer foregrounds and that the Old Testament could as well include but in fact leaves unmentioned precisely in order to prepare readers for the destiny-defining trial posed by God's most difficult and unpredictable imperatives. A manifestation of the Akedah's style, the narrative backgrounding points to a radical absence within God's presence; it throws into stark relief humankind's astonishing distance from the infinitude of God even when he makes himself known to be immediately at hand; and thus it removes attention from the quotidian, thereby giving the greatest emphasis to the human struggle to make sense of and not be overwhelmed or dismayed by what God does not disclose about his purposes, by what makes faith in God so challenging, by what makes commitment and fidelity to his imperatives so tortuous, and by what makes any claim of certainty about knowing what loving God requires of one so problematic—as is exemplified in the narrative of the "test" by which Abram becomes Abraham, the patriarch whose genealogical blessing marks the birth of Judaism and centuries later of Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

How does the Akedah enact its textual call for interpretation, dramatized as God's double-binding imperative that Abraham commit an act that is morally abominable? Principally by what it omits. For example, at the outset God "appears," Auerbach observes, "from some unknown height or depth" (8) and addresses Abraham by name. The narrating voice does not specify the time and place of this encounter, nor does it say how God "speaks." Evidently it is in a voice that is not so much literal as supraliminal, somehow enabling Abraham alone to "hear" it, wherever he might be. After Abraham responds, "Here I am," without specifying what he means by "here," God directs him, without explanation, "to take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Genesis 22:2). God does not declare his motivation. He does not say in his own voice what the narrating voice quotes him as saying—that he "tested Abraham"—and what commentators have repeatedly insisted is the self-evident reason—that God subjected Abraham to a trial of faith, even though God has already cut a covenant with him (Genesis 17).<sup>13</sup> Nor does God offer Abraham any hope that he might not have to follow through on the command to extinguish Isaac's life. Abraham for his part does not explain why he obeys, let alone without apparent hesitation, even though he has previously challenged God's intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, which means destroying not only its adults for their wickedness but also its children, including its newborns, those about to be born, and those still in their mothers' wombs.<sup>14</sup> Nor does Abraham object to the ethical meaning of God's demand that he build an altar, bind his son and set him upon it, and set both aflame in an excruciating enactment of an ethical wrong that God himself repudiates throughout the first five books and specifically enjoins and codifies in the commandments he imparts to Moses.



Contributing to the Akedah's stylistic backgrounding, the narrating voice also omits any mention of what happens between Abraham and his son on their journey to Moriah—of how they interact, of whether Abraham somehow indicates his love for his son in ways that accord with God's affirmation that he does. Does Isaac feel his father's love? Does he know what his father feels? Does he understand his father's double-bind? Is he not terrified when he learns that he is to be the sacrifice? Does he try to run from his father, struggle not to be bound, plead with his father as he is being lifted onto the altar? Does he cry out, whimper, shake uncontrollably? The narrating voice does not say. At no time does this voice describe the specific behavior of father and son let alone provide access to their experience of what they are going through. The narrating voice offers nothing about how father and son are affected by the ordeal of the paternal testing.

Nor does the narrating voice explain its own position in the text—its status, unremarked by commentators, as an anonymous witness to the events it relays, as if its authorial presence were unproblematic rather than another aspect of the narrative's background opacity. Is this textual voice decidable as human? Detached from a consciousness that it seems to have or that it simulates, might it be more and less than human?<sup>15</sup> If the limited omniscience of this voice, neither identifiably human nor divine, is to be trusted, why does it stipulate that the "test" is of the patriarch but not of his "dearly beloved" and "only" son? In other words, does the narrative voice not anesthetically deflect attention away from what it omits from its narrative, and does it not thereby encourage readers to find in the Akedah an aestheticizing perception that faith and ethics are concordant, harmoniously joined, bound together in a unity through which they engender a fundamental experience of being existentially protected?

What the narrating voice does not specify about its own perspective is of a piece with what the narrative does not mention about the test. In order to be a test and not a simulation of one, does the testing not require that Abraham believe that he must obey God's command; and that to obey he must, in fact, not only steel himself to slaying his son but must also raise his knife-wielding hand or hands over his son's body and reach the point where the difference between being about to act and beginning to act disappears? In that immeasurable instant, in that faith-driven contraction of his life, has Abraham not intended to kill his son? And has he not, therefore, in effect if not in fact, already sacrificed him, already offered him up to God? Does Isaac himself not recognize that the sacrifice has already occurred, even if he finds himself still alive? Will he ever forget being bound and laid out above the altar pyre? Does he escape being traumatized? Does Abraham recognize the possibility that Isaac will henceforth be haunted by a double terror of both his father and his father's God? Why does the narrating voice specify that "Abraham returned to his young men," those who had accompanied him and Isaac to Moriah, and they "went together to Beer-sheba," with no mention of Isaac?

Why, too, is the blessing given to Abraham by name and not also to Isaac? Why is the blessing relayed through an "angel of the Lord" and not God himself? Why is the first component of the blessing—the genealogical promise—conveyed as a hyperbolic analogy, such that Abraham's descendants will be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (22:17)? Why is this blessing stated in symbolic rather than literal terms? The second component of the blessing raises the same question. What can it possibly mean that Abraham's offspring "shall possess the gate of their enemies" and that by them "shall all the nations of the earth gain blessings for themselves" (22:17-18)?<sup>16</sup> This double blessing is not translatable as a determinable, decidable, causal outcome. It is, as the vacant causality of the angel's rhetoric indicates, a promise the guarantee of which is the word of the God who has demanded an action that would abrogate its fulfillment. What causal efficacy can inhere in Abraham's obedience such that the blessings of his people's future generations will transfer to their enemies "because," the angel says to Abraham on behalf of God, "you have obeyed my voice" (22:18)? Is the blessing not an idealized cover for an outcome that belies the impossibility of its promise being able to signify what can be known will happen, what is literally to come? Does the blessing not conceal the nature and essence of humankind's reproductivity—

namely, that every conception, every birth, every new life is purchased at the cost of the unknowable infinitude of other conceptions, other births, other lives, and thus other futures that might have occurred had not this particular birth come to pass?

A long tradition of commentary has failed to ask, let alone has attempted to answer, such questions. Two claims that the readability of God's intention and its narrative dramatization is self-evident will illustrate the anesthetizing hermeneutic strategy that characterizes this tradition. Each claim denies that Abraham would, should, or otherwise is prepared to believe that God intends him to immolate his son. According to Louis Jacobs, God's call "was only a 'test,' a divine vindication of Abraham's absolute trust in God. There was never any divine intention for Abraham to kill Isaac. God, being God, could never so deny his own nature as to wish a man to commit a murder in obedience to him." Such certainty, of course, explains away the problem of how a mortal mind can fathom God's transcendental consciousness, if consciousness is even an appropriate name for God's otherness. Insofar as God's "nature" were to be transparent to human understanding, why would it not be the case that the test was to see if Abraham would sacrifice himself rather than his son? Why would God need to use Isaac as the means of vindicating Abraham's trust, a use that from Kant on is recognized as unethical? Moreover, why would God need to vindicate Abraham's faith at all, the vindication occurring before no human audience, no human witness other than Abraham and Isaac?

Similar to Jacobs, Milton Steinberg declares that "From the Jewish viewpoint—and this is one of its highest dignities—the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances and not for anyone, not even for God. *Especially not for God.* . . . While it was a merit in Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his only son to his God, it was God's nature and merit that He would not accept an immoral tribute. And it was His purpose, among other things, to establish that truth" (147). If so, how can the truth of the ethical moment encompass the narrative's temporality, its movement from sacrifice demanded to sacrifice prohibited? If God will not accept "an immoral tribute," how is it "a merit in Abraham" to take the call seriously and to be "willing to sacrifice his only son to his God"? If the act of offering a human sacrifice is a heinous practice, how is it meritorious not to object at the outset? Moreover, if God abhors human sacrifice, why the pretense, the charade, of calling for just that act? What kind of speech-act is God's directive if it does not mean what it literally commands? If the two divine communications were reversed—if the angel had directed Abraham to travel to Moriah and there sacrifice a ram, and if at the instant that Abraham had been about to kill the animal God had said "hold" and demanded that Abraham offer up his son instead to prove that by his faith God comes before his obligations to children, family, friends, to all others none of whom is God—would this sequence of imperatives not make explicit not only the infanticidal meaning of God's demand at the outset of Genesis 22 but of God's own unethicity in making this demand?

Any number of other commentators have defended Abraham's faith and implicitly God's demand as ethical without scrutinizing their avoidance of the questions that, as Kierkegaard argued, reveal the ethical violation that introduces the Akedah and governs its drama. I shall not recapitulate the steps of Kierkegaard's arguments leading to his aporetic conclusion—that, on the one hand, Abraham must sacrifice what he loves, not hates, to the God he loves, not hates, even if he hates his God or his son for putting him in the position of sacrificing; but also that, on the other hand, as soon as he chooses God over his son, in "the instant he is ready to sacrifice Isaac," Abraham "is and remains a murderer" (*Fear and Trembling*, 84). In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida draws the inescapable consequence of the infinite distance between and yet infinite convergence of faith and ethical act—that is, of their undecidable difference and similarity:

'the sacrifice of Isaac' illustrates . . . the most common and everyday experience of responsibility. The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable: a father is ready to put to death his beloved son, his irreplaceable loved one, and that because the Other, the great Other, asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation. An infanticide father who hides what he is going to do, without knowing why, from his son and from his family, what could be more abominable, what mystery could be more frightful (*tremendum*) vis-à-vis love, humanity, the family, or morality.

But isn't this also the most common thing? what the most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm? Duty or responsibility binds me to the other. . . . But, of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility. . . . (68)

Ethical decisions and acts are not the opposite of sacrificial decisions and acts. Accepting and acting on one's ethical responsibility provides no escape from the existential bind of having to sacrifice because there is no possibility of establishing the absolute difference of the ethical and the sacrificial that does not immediately reveal the sacrificial condition—the sacrificial history as well as the sacrificial futurity, in other words, the sacrificial background and foreground—of any decision: there is no outside of sacrificality, and this is the case even if no empirical sacrifice takes place. More specifically, the logical form of the sacrificial—not any particular sacrificial act nor the decisions that set them in motion, but what their sacrificality—is the only condition under which a lineage, literal or symbolic, is founded, begotten, produced, effectuated, or otherwise begun. Sacrificality is the very logic of being, hence of any future, including the future that is projected as being traceable back to the decision that institutes it. And yet every *decision for* is a *decision against* all the other choices at hand and thus all the other futures that might otherwise have eventuated from them. For this reason, the future of futurity is always lost at the moment that what can be identified, however indefinitely, as a particular future is in the offering. Moreover, the loss in question is necessarily unknowable and therefore lost as lost.

This absolute loss of what is lost in Abraham's decision to raise his knife over the bound body of the son is figured throughout the Akedah in the singular directionality of its theme and its stylistic embodiments in the repetition of vertical movement—the placing of the wood for the sacrifice on top of the pack animal, the upward movement of the journey to Moriah, the climb up the mountain, the setting of Isaac upon the altar, Abraham's alacrity in "looking up" and seeing a ram when the angel interrupts him from slaying his son, and the etymology of Abraham's name and the word for the sacrifice that Abraham must make. "Abraham" literally means that "the father is high" and metaphorically that "the father is (to be) exalted." The man, whom God will elevate into the role of the father of his people, is, God tells him, to raise his knife-wielding hand in order to make of Isaac "a burnt offering"; the angel uses the same word for sacrifice when, at the last moment, this figure directs Abraham to make of a ram a "burnt offering instead of his son" (22:13). The word for burnt offering or holocaust, *'olāh* means "what goes up in smoke." (Strong 106). Its literal meaning, which is simultaneously symbolic and euphemistic, is not "what dies," "what becomes a corpse," "what is slain," but what disappears as it rises and disperses, hence what designates not the antithesis of death and life but the undecidable difference between and identity of them.

Mirroring and reproducing one another, the Akedah's thematic movements culminate in the rising smoke of the burnt offering, and as they do the entire narrative enacts an intuition that has been implicit until then—namely, that the relation of life to death is non-oppositional, that generativity sets in motion a loss beyond calculation, that being entails and occurs as an infinite loss of being, and that such loss is itself lost. Thus, the movement by which the perceptible traces of a sacrifice's holocaustic smoke are lost to sight is inscribed in the very Hebrew word for being or existence. As Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes: *kiyyum* means "to rise up (*la-koom*), to be tall (*koma zekufa*) in the presence of God" (*Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, 21). In other words, *to be* means, on the one hand, to have the very standing that is denied to the one who is laid out upon the altar. On the other hand, however, *to be* means that anyone and everyone's standing is a knife's edge away from what goes up in smoke and then becomes as invisible and directionless as the "wind from God" that "swept over the face of the waters" before God transforms the "formless void and darkness" into the light of being (Genesis 1:1-2). What goes up in smoke precedes the coming to be of the promised generational

fruition. No standing in the world is outside of the sacrificality that is its condition of possibility. To be is to be in relation to what is not, and is made possible by the cut between being and nothingness, between this being and all the other beings that might have been.

In the imagery of ascent, then, the Akedah simultaneously represents and elucidates its terrible apprehension of the undecidability of God's reproductive blessing: the generativity promised to come, the generativity that will be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (22:17), will be shadowed by what goes up in smoke; by what can be kept in sight only for the shortest of time in relation to the endlessness of what is lost not only to sight but to cognition; by what no generational gain can begin to account for, let alone retribute. In its linguistically coded evocation of the self-dispersing ascension of the smoke through which the once living then slain body of the sacrificial offering vanishes, the Akedah performs what it does not have the words to say about the sacrificial axis of being.

Over and above its particular stylistic formations, the Akedah includes its principle of self-interpreting composition and its enactment of this principle—that life arises only with and through and because of what goes up in smoke. This enactment, I believe, delimits, suspends, or attempts to remove the anesthetizing hermeneutic allure of God's blessing as without cost, as a pure gain, as if the blessing could annul or at least enable to be dismissed if not forgotten the unimaginable threat with which the narrative begins.

#### 4. Conclusion

The primary principle of evolutionary epistemology is that "there is a universal evolutionary mechanism that led . . . to the evolution of life in general, and . . . that this mechanism is also at work within the evolution of cognition, and within the products of cognition such as language, science and culture" (Gontier, "Evolutionary Epistemology"). In consequence, since every *decision for* is simultaneously a *decision against* that abolishes an infinitude of trajectories that might have begun through a different decision, for that reason the act of deciding metonymically designates the lifedeath structure and entailment of the entire activity of humankind's reflective consciousness. If life is never purely alive; if the living occurs only in its "enigmatic relationship . . . to its other" (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70); if the living includes the trace of what it is not and upon which it depends in order to be; if the living transmits (the transmissibility of) this simultaneously life-enabling and extinction-bearing trace through its biological reproductivity as well as through the changes it effects in the world with which it interacts; then so, too, must humankind's cultural formations be recognized as manifestations of lifedeath. In response, anesthetic criticism, as I envision it, seeks to align ideological critique and evolutionary studies in a common task not only of tracing when, how, and to what extent cultural formations aestheticize their costs and the deathliness that is intrinsic to them—whether by repressing, concealing, rationalizing, justifying, idealizing, or transcendentalizing them—but also and more urgently of clarifying the meaning and confronting the implications of how our species, at every present moment, is already inscribed in the infinitude of lost futures that every human decision begets.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Existence*, from the Latin *stare*, and cost, from the Latin *sistere*, both descend from the same Proto-Indo-European stem, *stá-*, “to stand.” Etymologically, the predication “existence costs” specifies an archaic recognition that life arises as an economy of loss. This loss is inevitable and inescapable, the meaning of the Latin root of necessity—*nesesse*, which derives from the PIE root *ked-*, “to go, yield,” the source of two words that signify death (*cease* and *decease*) as well as of words that signify reproductive generativity (*ancestor* and *predecessor*). The apothegm, “existence necessarily costs,” is meant to summarize what I consider to be a fundamental problem that evolutionary epistemology must confront—namely, how to account for the evolution of self-reflective consciousness and its autoaffectivity in terms not alone of their adaptive value but also of their adaptive costliness.
- <sup>2</sup> This discussion is part of an ongoing project to specify the implicitly deconstructive character of the evolutionary economy, within which “adaptation” is a placeholder term for what constrains organisms to live as they do. (See Kimball, “Derrida’s Gödelian Protocol, Lifedeath, and the Deconstructive Horizon of the Evolutionary Economy” and Kimball, Gödel’s Proof, Derrida’s Deconstructions, and the Evolutionary Aneconomy of Life/Death.) Thus, my purpose here does not depend on determining what life is nor on what adaptations are. Rather, my overarching aim is to examine how two canonical works of western literature confront the negative consequences of a consciousness that attempts to interpret itself—in evolutionary terms, that attempts to affirm its presumptive adaptivity—in aestheticizing terms.
- <sup>3</sup> If *Homo sapiens* is a single species, “our” commonality is paradoxical, for we appear to share an autoimmunity responsibility that may destroy our species. In numerous works Roberto Exposito has explicated how this paradox “traverses all the languages of modernity,” including “law, theology, anthropology, politics, and biology.” The reason why is that “immunity, as a privative category, only takes on relief as a negative mode of community. Similarly, when viewed in a mirror image, community appears to be entirely immunized, attracted and swallowed up in the form of its opposite. Immunity, in short, is the internal limit which cuts across community, folding it back on itself in a form that is both constitutive and derivative: immunity constitutes or reconstitutes community precisely by negating it” (*Immunitas*, 9).
- <sup>4</sup> My thesis is not about the ontology of an aesthetic object, event, or process. It is about what happens when the conceptual difference between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic is decided in such a way as to conceal its undecidability—that is, its necessary exclusions—the decision implicitly if not explicitly aestheticized. On the one hand, these exclusions are not themselves aesthetic and thus are not included in it. On the other hand, they must be included in the category they make possible. This is the set-theoretical problem of describing the aesthetic from outside the aesthetic. In the analysis offered here, then, the aesthetic is not the decidable opposite of the aesthetic but an uncertain indication of what a given theory of the aesthetic excludes. The uncertainty is double—productive, generative, revelatory, or otherwise valuable, indeed invaluable, and yet nevertheless unavoidably costly, subtractive, partitive, sacrificial.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Odyssey*, Robert Fitzgerald’s translation, book 1, lines 42–43. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
- <sup>6</sup> See Kimball, “Sacrifice, Revenge, and a Justice beyond Justice: *The Odyssey*,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, pp. 184–202, and Kimball, “Fiction and Emotion: The Relation of Consciousness to the Economy of Evolution.”
- <sup>7</sup> Odysseus is *δῖεΰόμῖδι* (*polytrophon*) (1: 1). He is “the man of many devices,” in A. T. Murray’s translation, and “resourceful” in Fitzgerald’s. Robert Fagles calls him “the man of many twists and turns.”
- <sup>8</sup> See Kimball, “Sacrifice, Revenge, and a Justice beyond Justice: *The Odyssey*,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, especially 193–202.
- <sup>9</sup> In *The Unity of the Odyssey*, George Dimock shows how the epic repeatedly associates the name “Odysseus” with the oxymoronic imagery of “sowing” or planting “seeds of evil,” with the metaphorical harvest culminating in the literal slaughter of the Suitors.
- <sup>10</sup> René Girard has expounded his theory of reciprocal violence in numerous works. See, for example, *Violence and the Sacred*, especially chapter two, “The Sacrificial Crisis,” 39–67; or the many online summaries of and commentaries on how Girard’s thesis that humankind’s species-constituting mimetic desire is inherently at risk of turning humans against one another.
- <sup>11</sup> And once Odysseus begins killing the Suitors, Athena herself observes the father and his son not from Olympus but as a swallow perched on a beam under the roof of the great hall (22: 264–266).



- <sup>12</sup> The New Testament begins with Matthew telescoping the Abrahamic lineage and renaming it “the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). Matthew then expands the genealogy with the advent of Jesus its Messianic telos (1:2–17).
- <sup>13</sup> See Kimball, “Infanticide and Reproduction in Genesis,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, especially 109–117, on the relation of the literal cutting that occurs in sacrifice to the metaphorical cutting of the covenant, a relation that is written on the male body in the ritual of circumcision.
- <sup>14</sup> See Kimball, “Infanticide and Reproduction in Genesis,” *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, 117–118, on how, when God rains down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), God “destroys both a particular people (a destruction that includes the possibility of literal infanticide), and through them part of his own creation” (118).
- <sup>15</sup> In *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, Brian Rotman explores how the technology of writing is able to virtualize consciousness, to abstract it from its biological embodiment, to detach it from the affectivity that underwrites human awareness, and thus to render it relocatable—for example, in a non-human identity: “Lacking all tone, an agency known only through the alphabetic inscription of its words would appear abstract and (chillingly) indifferent to the existence or not of its supposed addressee; it would also, by being unlocatable and unspecifiable as an individual, project an ‘other’—nonhuman—form of identity” (xxxiv).
- <sup>16</sup> Earlier, God has already announced this blessing to Abraham, though with a striking threat that disappears at the end of Genesis 22: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:2–3). What is the basis of those who would curse Abraham—and of God’s mimetic retaliation—if their families are included among “all the families of the earth” to receive a blessing that is universal?

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