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The Races of Poetry

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The image of racing is endemic to poetry. The *Iliad* culminates in a race: at the climax of the narrative, in book 22, Achilles chases Hector three times around the walls of Troy, in a pursuit that Homer specifically likens to a foot-race or a chariot-race. The image then returns in the following book, at the funeral games for Patroclus, which are dominated by actual races. Similar games, again with races as their most prominent feature, appear in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the same motif – one character running after another – becomes not just an incident in the plot, as in earlier epics, but in a sense the main plot itself: of the different types of recurrent episode in Ovid’s poem, the most conspicuous involves (typically) a male god chasing a nymph across the countryside. And in Dante’s *Inferno* – to look no further – the motif becomes so central as to be nearly invisible. Almost every canto of the *Inferno* features sinners running, or trudging, after each other, round and round in a perversely endless, unwinnable race.

All of these examples come from epic, but the image figures just as importantly in lyric poetry – in elegy, for instance, which often describes life metaphorically as a race that has been run to its end. It is worth inquiring why races form such a frequent poetic trope: what is the significance of this image? In what follows, I begin with a cluster of

elegiac examples stretching from William Wordsworth to A. E. Housman. Read in light of Sigmund Freud's theory of the death instinct, these suggest a fundamental connection between racing and poetic form, both of which exhibit a distinctive tendency towards closure that exists in tension with their natural forward impetus. I then turn to the particular case of epic, arguing that the image of the racer that pervades the epic tradition is almost invariably associated with the loss or blurring of individual identity. It seems fair to say that identity – whether in the sense of personal glory (*kleos*) sought by Achilles and the other heroes of the *Iliad*; or in the sense of family identity sought by Odysseus and Telemachus; or in the sense of national identity sought by Aeneas and his Trojans – forms the chief object of most epic endeavor. At the same time most epics tend to challenge or question the notion of identity and the possibility of drawing distinctions between different peoples (or even, in the case of the *Metamorphoses*, different species)¹. The racing motif is therefore central to the meaning of epic, just as it serves, at a broader level, as one of the representative tropes of all of poetry.

Wordsworth introduces an image of racing at the end of 'Three years she grew,' one of his group of 'Lucy' poems.

Thus Nature spake – The work was done –
 How soon my Lucy's race was run!
 She died, and left to me
 This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
 The memory of what has been,
 And never more will be.

(ll. 37-42)²

Wordsworth's use of 'her race was run' as a synonym for 'she died' is not at all unusual. But although it may be common, the metaphor of life as a race is nevertheless strikingly

odd. The whole point of a race is to finish as quickly as possible, whereas the aim of life, one would think, is to postpone the ending as long as possible. The familiar notion of ‘running one’s mortal race’ thus demands closer consideration, since it seems fundamentally illogical. It could be argued that ‘race’, in this case, means primarily a race *course*, and hence that the expression compares life, not to a competition, but to an allotted length of space (or, metaphorically, time).³ Or it could perhaps be said that the metaphor of life as a race is meant to highlight the sense of bustle, worry, and brevity that characterizes both. But even these explanations cannot dispel the sense that the metaphor remains inherently self-contradictory, since the aims of life and of a foot-race seem so essentially opposed.

Yet metaphors, to be effective, must be imperfect; they do not, to use Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s apt image, ‘run on all four legs’.⁴ In this case, Wordsworth takes advantage of the contradictoriness of the metaphor to draw our attention to a self-contradiction in human nature itself. Lucy is presented, in this poem at least, as a child; and children *do* tend to see life as a race, in the sense that they are often impatient to grow up as quickly as possible. The metaphor is only illogical, therefore, from the point of view of age or experience. From the point of view of youth, it is perfectly natural to wish to run through life as if it were a race. When William Shakespeare’s Juliet, fourteen years old and longing for Romeo, apostrophizes the horses drawing the chariot of the sun, she does so in the language of a spectator at a race: ‘Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds’ (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.2.1).⁵ By contrast Christopher Marlowe’s Faustus, nearing the end of his allotted span, begs for the opposite. ‘*O lente, lente currite noctis equi*’, he implores (quoting Ovid): ‘Slowly, run slowly, O horses of the night’ – an instance of

what, as will become clear, is a recurring poetic image of a slow-motion race (*Doctor Faustus*, 5.2.152).⁶ The image of life as a race to the finish may be inherently contradictory; but the contradiction is itself revealing.

Tennyson's Tithonus (who similarly addresses the dawn in her horse-drawn chariot) introduces a poignant twist in his use of the metaphor.

Why should a man desire in any way
To vary from the kindly race of men,
Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance
Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

(ll. 28-31)⁷

Tithonus originally seems to be using 'the race of men' simply to mean 'humankind', but the subsequent image of running beyond the appointed goal gives the phrase a metaphorical force. The pathos in this instance lies in the revelation that Tithonus, in his extreme old age, has outlived Faustus' point of view and returned to Juliet's. For Tithonus the metaphor has a renewed logic, since he wishes to finish his race of life as soon as possible. The same revelation occurs, with even greater force, in Housman's 'To an Athlete Dying Young', perhaps the finest racing poem in English. Its opening stanzas once again equate life with a foot-race.

The time you won your town the race
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
And home we brought you, shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

(ll. 1-8)⁸

The metaphor is never made explicit but is nevertheless conveyed by the parallelism of the two stanzas: winning a race and finishing one's life produce the same result

(‘shoulder-high’). The poem even seems to imply some sort of causal relationship between the two events. Although good sprinters do not actually die younger than other people, the sequence of images appears to suggest otherwise – as if the greatest runners were destined always to finish first. Housman takes advantage of this implication to produce the startling turn at the beginning of the third stanza. Instead of mourning the young man’s death, the speaker instead congratulates him on having achieved his goal: ‘Smart lad, to slip betimes away’ (l. 9). Despite the schoolmasterly tone of his words (‘Smart lad’), the speaker here unexpectedly adopts the youthful point of view of Lucy or Juliet; or perhaps it is the viewpoint of the superannuated Tithonus. Either way, he reaffirms the counter-intuitive proposition that life is a race, and that victory lies in completing it as quickly and perfectly as possible.

This is the paradox Freud addresses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The treatise begins by considering children, in whom Freud observes two equally powerful but conflicting impulses. The first is the desire, which we have already noted, to grow up as quickly as possible – to race through time. But the second is a desire for time to stop – the infantile wish that things should forever remain exactly as they are. From this, as well as from other evidence (such as the experience of recurrent dreams), Freud extrapolates the existence of two contradictory drives that govern our actions: a life instinct, which tends towards growth, change, and reproduction, and a more counter-intuitive death instinct, an ‘urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things’ (p. 43).⁹ These two drives coexist, according to Freud, with each taking precedence in alternation. ‘One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been

reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey' (p. 49).

Literary theorists have long made good use of the ideas put forth in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Most importantly for our purposes, Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, brilliantly takes Freud's notion of competing life and death instincts as a model for his account of the contradictory drives that govern our reading of narrative. The reader of a story or novel wishes to reach the conclusion, Brooks explains, but also to postpone that conclusion. We want the hero and heroine to get married, but not right away; we hope the detective will solve the crime, but not too soon. 'The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence the desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, ... which is the plot of narrative' (p. 104).¹⁰ A story succeeds by keeping these two desires in tension.

Brooks's compelling argument has been enormously influential in narrative studies. I wish to add to it only two corollaries. First, if we accept Brooks's theory, then racing can serve as a metaphor for reading just as aptly as for living. All three activities share the same basic paradox. A runner, like a novel-reader, takes pleasure in what he does – he wishes to run – yet as a competitor he also longs for a conclusion, an end to his running. The second corollary is that everything Brooks says about novels applies *a fortiori* to poetry. It necessarily applies, of course, to narrative poetry such as epic, in at least the same measure as to any other narrative. But in addition, every feature that distinguishes poetry from prose is a feature that strongly nourishes both impulses – the desire for complication, and the desire for resolution.

Brooks hints at this second point in passing, when he notes all the literary devices that involve repetition, thus producing the sense of regression he associates with the death instinct – almost all of which are primarily poetic devices. Brooks points out that ‘rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, refrain, all the mnemonic elements of literature and indeed most of its tropes are in some manner repetitions that take us back in the text’ (p. 99). But it is worth pursuing this observation to its logical conclusion. On the one hand, poetry resembles a novel (as Brooks describes it) in providing readerly pleasure through prolongation. The opening foot of an iambic pentameter or the opening rhyme of a heroic couplet resemble a twist in the plot: they introduce a welcome complication, a sense of irresolution. In a poem, however, unlike in a novel, the equally welcome sense of resolution arrives almost immediately, through the force of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls ‘poetic closure’.¹¹ Every time a line, a couplet, a stanza comes to an end, the reader experiences a pleasurable release of tension. Poetry equals the novel, in other words, in catering to the reader’s desire for new complications. But whereas in a novel the opposing desire – the desire to conclude – is gratified only at the end, in a poem it is gratified repeatedly. A poem dies a thousand deaths, a novel dies but one.¹²

Hence the prevalence of racing imagery in poetry. The comparison of life to a race will always be more effective in a poem than elsewhere, because its inherent contradiction is one that the reader of poetry is constantly experiencing. The conflicting desires that govern reading – the wish to continue, the wish to conclude – find their most concentrated expression in poetry. Even aside from the metaphor, moreover, the figure of the racer is particularly appropriate to poetry. A racer, more than other athletes, shares with the reader of poetry a delight in process (movement) in tension with a concurrent

desire for a swift end to that process. Images of racing thus pervade poetry, because the race embodies a poem's dual impetus: its onward momentum and its perpetual pressure to conclude.

Such a tension between motion and stasis characterizes the climactic chase scene of the *Iliad*. The heroic encounter between Hector and Achilles, toward which the whole epic has been building, begins surprisingly, with Hector fleeing and Achilles pursuing him around the walls of Troy. Yet Homer presents this image – one man chasing behind another man – not as something grotesque but as something archetypal, familiar to us all from our dreams.

As in a dream a man is not able to follow one who runs
from him, nor can the runner escape, nor the other pursue,
so he could not run him down in his speed, nor the other get clear.

(22.199-201)¹³

The simile recalls the contradictory drives described by Freud (who similarly adduces dreams). Hector and Achilles are running at full speed; yet because the distance between them remains the same, they seem to themselves to be running in slow motion, or even to have reached a complete standstill. In a more extended passage describing the same pursuit, Homer invokes an equally archetypal comparison: Hector and Achilles are likened to participants in a race, with all the Greeks and Trojans and even the gods themselves as spectators.

They ran beside these, one escaping, the other after him.
It was a great man who fled, but far better he who pursued him
rapidly, since here was no festal beast, no ox-hide
they strove for, for these are prizes that are given men for their running.
No, they ran for the life of Hektor, breaker of horses.
As when about the turnposts racing single-foot horses
run at full speed, when a great prize is laid up for their winning,

a tripod or a woman, in games for a man's funeral,
 so these two swept whirling about the city of Priam
 in the speed of their feet, while all the gods were looking upon them.
 (22.157-66)

The first half of this passage seems to deny the similarity between the chase on the battlefield and a race (this is no mere contest for prizes), only for the second half to reaffirm it. In lines that look forward proleptically to the funeral games for Patroclus, which will take up nearly the whole of the subsequent book, the two warriors fighting for their lives are compared to men competing 'in games'. Far from being bathetic, the simile serves as a reminder of the essential connection between sport and war. The long, detailed descriptions of the athletic contests in book 23, the penultimate book of the *Iliad*, do not represent a diversion from the central story of the war. Rather, the races and various other sports represent a sublimation of war – a displacement (but only slight) of all the same skills and passions that have occupied these warriors through nine years of battle.¹⁴

In this sense, the sporting contests resemble poetry, which in the Homeric world serves a similar function. In poetry as in sport, military prowess can be celebrated at one remove, without the necessity of death and destruction. When Achilles withdraws himself and his troops from battle at the beginning of the *Iliad*, he and Patroclus solace themselves for the loss of glory by taking up the lyre and 'singing of men's fame' (9.189). When Achilles once again calls for a temporary suspension of fighting after killing Hector, he ordains a set of funeral games. But the impulse in both cases is the same: in place of battle, the heroes indulge in an aestheticized *mimesis* of martial endeavor – the glory without the bloodshed. Homer further reinforces this parallel in the

Odyssey, where (as I describe below) sport and poetry are treated as interchangeable activities.

Yet not all sports are given equal treatment: the funeral games in *Iliad* 23 exhibit a striking disproportion between racing and all other types of athletic contest. The chariot-race with which the games begin occupies four hundred lines of verse, more than twice as much as all the non-racing competitions put together. The next longest description is of the foot-race; none of the others occupies more than fifty lines. This disproportion is not merely incidental but draws attention to a crucial distinction. Racing differs from other sports in two fundamental ways. First, racing is unusual in that the contestants never face one another. A racer, therefore, never truly knows who his competitors are. The runner in front sees nobody at all; the ones behind see only the backs of the others. This sets racing apart from all the other Homeric contests – boxing, wrestling, sword-fighting – in which opponents encounter face to face.¹⁵ Second, although racing resembles the other contests at the funeral games in testing skills employed in war (running and chariot-driving), it differs from the others in that the winner on a race course is the *opposite* from the winner on a battlefield. In a race, the runner in front is winning, the one behind is losing. But in battle – when Achilles is chasing Hector – the roles are reversed. The image of one runner behind another is thus inherently ambiguous, since without context – unless the viewer knows whether this is a race or a chase – it is impossible to tell winner from loser. Yet in epic both races and chases are common, and they are not always easily distinguishable. Hence Homer's confusing double simile, in which Achilles' pursuit of Hector is first differentiated from a race and then, confusingly, equated with it.

These two peculiarities are significant, because both have the effect of blurring the contestants' identity. Most contests, and war above all, draw the sharpest possible distinction between opposing sides. But in a race or a chase, the identities of the opponents are obscured or concealed, and at times even merge with one another. An example of such concealment occurs just before Achilles' pursuit of Hector. At the start of book 22, Achilles is chasing after the Trojan hero Agenor – or thinks he is, not recognizing that the figure running in front of him is in fact Apollo, until the god finally reveals himself.

‘Why, son of Peleus,
do you keep after me in the speed of your feet, being mortal
while I am an immortal god? Even yet you have not
seen that I am a god, but strain after me in your fury.’

(22.7-10)

The trope of unrecognizability then reappears during the funeral games. Near the end of the foot-race, Ajax is leading. Odysseus, running second, can see only his back – Homer explicitly notes that ‘Great Odysseus was breathing on the back of the head of Aias’ (23.765). But a moment later Ajax's face is suddenly hidden in a different way: in his speed he slips in a patch of cow dung and sprawls headlong. By the time Ajax, who now trails Odysseus, crosses the finish line, all his features are caked in filth: ‘his mouth and nose were filled with the cow dung’ (23.777). This motif of the effacement of a runner's features recurs throughout the epic tradition.

In the great chariot-race that begins the games, identity seems not only to be obscured but to be exchanged. As the chariots come down the final stretch, the narrative switches from the point of view of the racers to that of the spectators waiting at the finish line. All are able to see a single figure out in front, but they cannot agree on who he is:

Idomeneus claims (correctly) that it is Diomedes, the eventual winner; Ajax responds with equal assurance that it is Eumelos, who ends up coming in last. (The two nearly come to blows in their dispute over the racer's identity.) But this confusion merely echoes the far more poignant blurring of identities from the previous book. During the terrible race around the walls of Troy, the man in front is Hector. But he is wearing the armor of Achilles – stripped from Patroclus the day before, but otherwise worn only by Achilles throughout the course of the war. The distinction between the two figures is thus almost erased: to the gods and men watching from every side, Achilles would have seemed to be chasing himself.

In a very real sense, that is precisely what he is doing. Earlier in the poem, after withdrawing from battle, Achilles reveals that he has been given a choice. If he persists in his determination to give up fighting and return home, he will be assured a long life: 'my end in death will not come to me quickly' (9.416). If he chooses to reenter the fight, however, he will die on the plains of Troy. By chasing down Hector, Achilles is thus directly hastening his own end. It is only fitting, therefore, that the figure who flies before him should resemble him, since the two men's destinies are no longer distinguishable. What in Housman's poem was merely an implication is here a literal truth: by winning this particular foot-race, Achilles is making sure of dying young. He is racing to complete his own life.

In these instances identity is not merely hidden but exchanged. Winner and loser, pursuer and pursued, Greek and Trojan are not clearly opposed but blended together. The indistinguishability of apparent enemies is by no means restricted to these moments but forms one of the major motifs of the *Iliad*. In a famous encounter in book 6, for instance,

Glaucus and Diomedes, on the verge of fighting one another, discover an ancient family alliance and so swear friendship instead, even going so far as to exchange armor.

Already at the outset of the poem, in fact, the notion of any essential difference between the two sides is dispelled when Achilles, after years of fighting, declares his undying hatred not for the Trojans ('since to me they have done nothing' [1.153]) but for the Greek commander Agamemnon. Yet nowhere is this breakdown of distinctions, this fungibility of apparently opposed identities, more concisely illustrated than in the races at the end – moments when faces are hidden, and even the roles of winner and loser cannot be clearly determined.

Subsequent epics repeat and reinforce these associations between racing and poetry, and between racing (or chasing) and the loss of identity. The *Odyssey* provides a brief but telling example of the former. When Odysseus is shipwrecked on the island of Phaeacia, his hosts entertain him with a series of sporting contests, starting with a foot-race (which once again is described at greater length than the other competitions). What distinguishes these games from those in the *Iliad*, however, is that the connection of sport to war is so attenuated as to be almost invisible. The Phaeacians are an isolated, hyper-cultivated people who have never gone to war. For them, therefore, sport has lost most of its martial connotations; their contests involve none of the tricks and angry squabbles that marked the funeral games of Patroclus. Instead, the Phaeacians treat racing and other sports as a purely aesthetic endeavor, which they explicitly align with poetry.

The entertainment for Odysseus begins with the bard Demodocus reciting the exploits of Greek warriors, until Alcinous, the king of Phaeacia, proposes a shift from

poetic to athletic displays. But the games then come to an abrupt halt when one of the young athletes tries to goad Odysseus into participating. Odysseus, angered at what he perceives as a slight to his prowess, grows bellicose and competitive: he angrily hurls a discus over the heads of his hosts, then challenges them to box or wrestle with him. The Phaeacians are ‘stricken to silence’ by his unaccountable behavior until Alcinous again intervenes, explaining to his guest the Phaeacians’ preference for less confrontational activities, such as boat- and foot-racing, and proposing a return from sport back to poetry (8.234).¹⁶ ‘My friend,’ he says,

we are not perfect in our boxing, nor yet as wrestlers,
but we do run lightly on our feet, and are excellent seamen,
and always the feast is dear to us, and the lyre and dances ...
Come then,
you who among all the Phaiakians are the best dancers,
do you dance, so that our guest, after he comes home
to his own people, can tell them how far we surpass all others
in our seamanship and the speed of our feet and dancing and singing.
Let someone go quickly and bring Demodokos and his clear-voiced
lyre, which must have been set down somewhere in our palace.

(8.246-55)

The discourse moves smoothly from ‘the speed of our feet’ to dancing to singing.¹⁷

Demodocus then resumes his tales of heroic deeds, and racing yields to poetry – one aestheticized form of conflict to another.¹⁸

The same equation of the two activities appears in *Paradise Lost*. After Satan flies off to spy on Adam and Eve, in book 2, his troops of rebel angels, recently defeated in war, are left with nothing to do. Some channel their energies into racing, others into reciting epic verse.

Part on the plain, or in the air sublime
Upon the wing, or in swift race contend,
As at the Olympian games or Pythian fields;
Part curb their fiery steeds, or shun the goal

With rapid wheels ...
 Others more mild,
 Retreated in a silent valley, sing
 With notes angelical to many a harp
 Their own heroic deeds and hapless fall.

(*PL* 2.528-49)¹⁹

Milton's expression 'shun the goal' nicely captures the spirit of the race he is describing. Its primary meaning is that the chariot-racers try to avoid crashing into the turning posts. But the phrase also conveys the racers' disinclination to reach the end – since the aim of this race is not so much to finish first as to divert the participants' thoughts, for as long possible, from their new and dismal situation. The passage thus suggests the relationship between racing and poetry not only by positing them as alternative (and implicitly equivalent) activities, but by reminding us of the contradictory impulses that underlie them both.

Virgil closely imitates Homer's images of racing but strengthens their implications, particularly as regards the effacement or mingling of identities.²⁰ The games in book 5 of the *Aeneid*, in honor of Anchises, are directly patterned on those of the *Iliad*. They begin with a boat-race (which takes the place of Homer's chariot-race), followed by a foot-race. The latter especially resembles its Homeric model: like Ajax, the lead runner, Nisus, slips just before the finish line, and his features are likewise covered in filth.

Here the young man, already flushed with victory, could not
 Keep his footing on the ground; he teetered, and fell headlong
 Face down in the filthy slime and the blood of sacrificed animals.

(5.331-33)²¹

Virgil, however, introduces several changes. Where Ajax slipped in dung, Nisus more ominously slips in blood, which foreshadows his violent death a few books later. The

portent is then reinforced when Nisus, from his prone position, trips the second-place runner so that his beloved friend Euryalus can win the race – just as he will later lay down his life in an effort (though vain) to save Euryalus' life. Virgil thus invests the race with more explicit symbolism than Homer does.

Virgil also notably extends the associations we have already observed. First, there is the sense once again that life is like a race – that the fastest runners will reach the end most swiftly. Virgil introduces Nisus and Euryalus in book 5 as the joint winners of the foot-race (Nisus who should have finished first, Euryalus who does). In book 9 they then become Virgil's archetypes of those who win glory by dying young. Again, as in Housman's poem, there is no actual connection between racing and short life – the pair are not chosen for their daring midnight mission because they are fast runners – but that implication nevertheless hovers over their deaths. Second, the blurring of Nisus' identity when he slips in the race carries even more significance than does the similar moment in Homer. Nisus and Euryalus eventually meet their end through an exchange of armor: during their raid on the Rutulian camp, Euryalus strips one of his slaughtered foes of a helmet and puts it on; but the helmet then unluckily catches the attention of an enemy patrol, and the two Trojans are captured and killed as a consequence. The blood that hides Nisus' face during the foot-race thus foreshadows not only his imminent death but the manner of that death – the crossing of identities that proves his undoing.

Such mingling of identity is suggested by the boat-race as well, where it is figured, however, more positively. Like the chariot-race in the *Iliad*, the boat-race in the *Aeneid* begins the sequence of games and is described at disproportionate length. Strikingly, all the participating vessels are named after creatures that represent a mingling

or miscegenation of different species, including Chimaera (a mixture of lion, snake, and goat), Centaur (half man, half horse), and Scylla (half woman, half sea-beast). The fourth boat is called ‘Pristis’, a word of indeterminate meaning, variously translated as ‘sea-monster’, ‘whale’, or ‘shark’; Virgil uses the term earlier in the poem (3.427) to describe the lower half of Scylla, the part that is shaped like a fish but gives birth to dogs. In every case the names represent an extreme of the identity confusion that always pertains to races.

The names of the racing vessels are significant, because the blurring of distinctions between apparently incompatible groups is even more central to the *Aeneid* than to the *Iliad*. The motif is introduced already in Aeneas’ account of the fall of Troy, during which a group of Trojan soldiers adopts the stratagem of wearing Greek armor, only to be slaughtered by their fellow Trojans as a result (2.386-430).²² But if Trojan identity is sometimes difficult to distinguish from Greek, the same is even truer of the Trojans and Italians. The whole second half of the *Aeneid* pitches the Trojans in a bloody war against the very people with whom they wish to intermarry and intermingle. Turnus and his cohorts are Aeneas’ enemies, yet they are also destined to join with the Trojans to become the ancestors of Rome. In the *Aeneid*, then, the mingling of national identities represents both a threat and a desideratum. The races in book 5, with their images of identities blurred, whether voluntarily (in the case of the names of the ships) or violently, serve as a focal point for these larger tensions.

Finally, almost all of the different implications of racing are summed up in Virgil’s meter. I have already noted that most poetic tropes and devices tend to gratify both of the readerly instincts identified by Brooks – the desire for complication or

continuation and the desire for resolution or closure. But in few instances is this duality more clearly demonstrated than in the Virgilian dactylic hexameter. Although Virgil employs the same basic meter as Homer, his verse differs from Homer's in two major ways. In the first place, Virgil introduces enjambment as a regular feature of his poem. Whereas Homer's lines are largely end-stopped and his grammar overwhelmingly paratactic, so that most line-endings coincide with the end of a clause, Virgil's verses are enjambed and his syntax hypotactic; a single sentence often unfurls over many lines before coming to a resting point. Hence Virgil, far more than Homer, propels the reader forward: the open-ended syntax and absence of end-stopping provide complications that must wait for their resolution. At the same time, however, the opposite is also true. The other major difference in Virgil lies in the presence of a second rhythm, since a Latin dactylic hexameter, unlike Homer's, features two types of stress: the natural accent of the words, and the *ictus* of the meter. Generally these two patterns – the native Latin accent and the imported 'Greek' stress (the meter having been borrowed from Greek poetry) – clash in the first half of a line but coincide at the conclusion.²³ Hence the Virgilian hexameter provides a strong feeling of closure to complement the feeling of delay: although the sense may carry on from line to line, the sound reaches a resolution at the end of each line. It is notable, moreover, that the sense of closure derives from the coincidence of the disparate Latin and Greek rhythms; almost every line of the *Aeneid* could thus be said to represent a microcosm of the blending of national identities that constitutes the thrust of the whole poem. In this, as well as in the tension of its opposing drives, each line embodies in miniature the paradoxes of racing that are displayed in narrative form during the games.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* moves these narrative and thematic tropes squarely to the foreground. Scenes of characters running after one another, which in earlier epics formed only an episode, though often a crucial or climactic episode, lie at the very heart of the *Metamorphoses*. (In these scenes chases outnumber races, but both have a similar effect.)²⁴ Likewise the shifting or exchange of identities, rather than occurring symbolically, through the obscuring of facial features or the exchange of armor, here takes place overtly: the basic story of Ovid's poem, repeated with countless variations, involves the transformation of a human being into an animal, vegetable, or mineral. Finally, the dual impulse toward closure and continuity, evident in Virgil at the level of the line, reappears in the *Metamorphoses* at a narrative level. Ovid's epic is composed of dozens of individual episodes; every few hundred lines, therefore, the narrative reaches a conclusion. Yet the sense of closure is never quite complete. In the first place, each story ends, not with a death or other marker of definite resolution, but with a more ambiguous scene of transformation. Second, each episode merges into the next, as the ending of one transforms into the starting point for another. A large part of Ovid's achievement lies in his wondrous arrangement of discrete stories into one seamless, continuous discourse; his poem is continually concluding while also pressing tirelessly onward. In all these ways the *Metamorphoses* could be considered the 'raciest' poem in the Western canon.

The first chase scene in the poem, which sets the pattern for all the others, comes in book 1, with the legend of Apollo and Daphne. After recounting the stories of creation

and the great flood, Ovid introduces the topic of racing: soon after the deluge, Apollo establishes the Pythian games, at which racers compete for a garland.

Here all whose hand or foot or wheel had won,
Received the honour of a wreath of oak.
Laurels were still unknown.

(1.448-50)²⁵

To explain how the laurel wreath replaced the oak as a symbol of victory, Ovid then recounts the story of Apollo's own foot-race in pursuit of Daphne. Smitten with love, the god chases the nymph across the countryside, wooing her as they run. In doing so he uses almost exactly the same words he addresses to Achilles in the *Iliad*. In Homer, Achilles chases Apollo not knowing who he is because the god is running ahead (as Apollo says, 'even yet you have not recognized me' [*Il.* 22.9-10]). In Ovid, Apollo is running behind Daphne, but he makes the same point: because we are racing after each other, you cannot see who I am. 'Nescis, temeraria, nescis / quem fugias': 'You do not know, rash girl, you do not know whom you flee' (1.514-15, my translation). Her pursuer, he tells her, is none other than the god of poetry: 'I shape the harmony of song and strings' (1.518).

Apollo keeps gaining on Daphne, 'breathing close / Upon her shoulders and her tumbling hair' (1.542). But Daphne, who has sworn perpetual virginity, prays to her father for help and is transformed in mid-flight:

her tender bosom
Was wrapped in thin smooth bark, her slender arms
Were changed to branches and her hair to leaves;
Her feet but now so swift were anchored fast
In numb stiff roots, her face and head became
The crown of a green tree; all that remained
Of Daphne was her shining loveliness.

(1.548-52)

Daphne vividly exemplifies Freud's death instinct: the desire to remain exactly as you are (a child, a virgin) without change, or more radically still to regress – to resume an earlier state of animate or even inanimate existence. In the space of a hundred lines, therefore, we find a reaffirmation of the interrelated tropes of running, poetry, and the competing instincts that align them.

The same scenario is then repeated, with variations, throughout the *Metamorphoses*. Sometimes the transformation happens first, as in the case of Actaeon, who is turned into a stag before being pursued by his hounds, who fail to recognize him. But in every case pursuit entails the eventual loss or blurring of identity. Perhaps the most unnerving of all the chase scenes comes in book 5, when the nymph Arethusa recounts how she was pursued by the river god Alpheus.

The sun was at our backs: I saw in front –
Or it was fear that saw – a giant shadow.
For sure I heard his frightful footfalls, felt
His panting breath upon my braided hair.

(5.614-17)

The horror of this scene lies in the detail of the giant shadow, which flies ahead of Arethusa's feet (*praecedere longam ante pedes umbram*). Even as Arethusa is running in front, therefore – she even specifies that Alpheus is breathing on the back of her head, just as Odysseus did to Ajax in the *Iliad*, and Apollo to Daphne – she is also the one behind. *She* is chasing *him* around the countryside; or rather, to refresh an old figure of speech, they are literally chasing each other. Still more uncannily, although Arethusa can see the image of Alpheus before her, his face, as always, is hidden. Just as he sees only the back of her head, so she sees only the shadow of his – a featureless outline. Worst of all, the shadow is unattributed – simply 'a giant shadow' (*longam umbram*). Arethusa

clearly means to indicate that it belongs to Alpheus, who is so close behind her that she can see his shadow. But grammatically the shadow could belong to Arethusa herself. And logically it must belong to both: if the sun is at their backs, her shadow as well as his must lie before her feet. Already as they run, therefore, their forms have already begun to mingle. His shadow falls both upon her back and before her feet, where it blurs her own outline; as befits a river god, Alpheus thus engulfs Arethusa, surrounding her on all sides. This image prefigures the end of the tale, when Arethusa not only loses her original identity but – unusually for the *Metamorphoses* – yields it to her pursuer. Unlike Daphne, whose transformation into a tree protects her from Apollo, Arethusa is transformed, counter-effectively, into a river. This allows the god to achieve his original desire of mingling with her: Alpheus ‘resumed / His watery self to join his stream with me’ (5.638). The fusion of identities between pursuer and pursued, implied in other scenes from the *Iliad* onward, here becomes total.

The biggest and longest set of races in poetry appears in Dante’s *Inferno*. They are the biggest in that they involve every person who has ever died without salvation (including all the characters from the pagan epics we have been considering), and the longest in that they endure for eternity. They can be considered ‘races’ both because of their form – in most parts of hell the damned move constantly in the same direction around a circular track – and because they perpetuate all the various tropes associated with racing. Dante witnesses one such race even before he has even entered hell: in front of the infernal gate, innumerable tortured souls are forced to run in perpetual pursuit of a flying flag. Virgil explains that these are the undecided – those who in their lives refused

to commit themselves fully either to good or to evil. As retribution for their failure to achieve any fixed identity, they are condemned, appropriately, to race forever.

[I] saw a banner
that, as it wheeled about, raced on – so quick
that any respite seemed unsuited to it.
Behind that banner trailed so long a file
of people – I should never have believed
that death could have unmade so many souls.

(3.52-57)²⁶

Already at the outset racing is thus directly aligned with wavering or indistinct identity.

In hell itself the races take many forms. Sometimes they move in slow motion: in canto 23 the hypocrites, wearing cloaks of gilded lead, are forced to move ‘with lagging steps, in circles’ (23.59).²⁷ Sometimes the racers are entirely immobile, as at the bottom of the ninth circle, where sinners are buried in ice up to their necks. Yet even here it seems right to call them ‘racers,’ since the traditional tropes reappear. Notably, the ice contains Ugolino and Ruggieri, the former buried behind the latter and perpetually gnawing the back of his skull (cantos 32-33). This memorably grotesque image, coming right at the end of *Inferno*, has become one of the iconic moments of Dante’s poem. Yet it is really just an elaboration (though fantastic) of a standard trope – that of the runner who breathes upon the back of the head of the runner in front, as happens to Ajax, and later to Daphne and Arethusa. In this episode, in fact, Dante has combined – and greatly intensified – two separate moments of pursuit from the *Iliad*: the foot-race in book 23, when Odysseus breathes on the back of Ajax’ head, and the nightmare simile in book 22, in which two runners seem to be forever frozen in the same positions, neither one able to change his place in relation to the other.²⁸

The most notable trope that Dante picks up from his epic predecessors, however, is the effacement or exchange of identities. On the one hand, the damned do maintain their individual identities in hell: they still remember their former lives and continue to experience personal desires and hatreds even after death. On the other hand, much of the horror of hell derives from the lack of individuation. Hell receives all alike: countless sinners from all different times and places are lumped ignominiously together in each circle, all subject to the same type of punishment. And the oppressively inescapable presence of others constitutes much of their torment. Ugolino and Ruggieri, for instance, who were set in such deadly opposition in their lifetimes, are now forced to share the same space for all eternity. And although on earth there was a clear winner and loser in their contest – Ruggieri tortured and killed Ugolino, together with most of his family – in hell that distinction is in a sense blurred, since the roles are reversed (Ugolino now inflicts pain on Ruggieri), and in a sense entirely erased, as they find themselves in the same predicament (consumed by ice).

The most vivid example of sinners who share identities comes with the thieves (canto 25). In punishment for their failure to distinguish, in life, between what belonged to others and what belonged to themselves, in death the thieves are compelled constantly to trade bodily forms with one another. Dante describes a spectacular scene in which a sinner in the shape of a serpent catches and embraces one in the shape of a man: ‘Then just as if their substance were warm wax, / they stuck together and they mixed their colors, / so neither seemed what he had been before,’ until finally ‘in one face where two had been dissolved, / two intermingled shapes appeared’ (25.61-63, 71-72). Dante then

interrupts his description to compare himself with Ovid, claiming that the latter never depicted, in all the *Metamorphoses*, such total interfusion of two individuals.

Let Ovid now be silent, where he tells
Of Cadmus, Arethusa; if his verse
has made of one a serpent, one a fountain,
I do not envy him; he never did
transmute two natures, face to face, so that
both forms were ready to exchange their matter.

(25.97-102)

One might be tempted to quibble with this boast, since Arethusa does ‘exchange her matter’ with Alpheus. But the very insistence of the claim makes it clear, in any case, that the mingling of identities, just as much as constant motion, constitutes a defining feature of Dante’s hell.

Other tropes associated with racing abound in the poem. At a formal level, Dante’s *terza rima* (aba bcb ...) displays the dual impulses of closure and continuity we have observed elsewhere; it offers a stanzaic equivalent to Virgil’s hexameters and Ovid’s nested, self-perpetuating narratives. The same rhyme scheme and the same tropes continue in the *Purgatorio*, which also shows characters moving in a circle, profiting from their motion yet longing for it to end. Nor is Dante, of course, the end of the line: races constantly recur in later poems, lyric as well as epic, as we have seen. But one final example from Dante can stand for all. At the center of the *Inferno*, in canto 15, Dante encounters his old mentor, whom at first he does not recognize because the features have been partly burned away.

That spirit having stretched his arm toward me,
I fixed my eyes upon his baked, brown features,
so that the scorching of his face could not
prevent my mind from recognizing him;
and lowering my face to meet his face,
I answered him: ‘Are you here, Ser Brunetto?’

(15.25-30)²⁹

Dante implores him to stay and speak, and Brunetto feels conflicted: he longs to stop, but his torments compel him to keep moving. The two therefore continue to circle as they talk, and Dante assures his master, ‘Within my memory is fixed ... your dear, your kind paternal image’ (15.82-83). Even though Brunetto’s features have been obfuscated, therefore, his ‘image’ remains, transferred to the poet who is now walking beside him.

At last Brunetto begins to fear that he will be caught by some of the sinners who are following behind him, and he runs off. The canto ends with a deservedly celebrated image of a foot-race, in which Brunetto – condemned though he is to the eighth circle of hell – is figured as the winner.

And then he turned and seemed like one of those
who race across the fields to win the green
cloth at Verona; of those runners, he
appeared to be the winner, not the loser.

(15.121-24)

The episode, which features two poets in conversation, combines all the different poetic tropes that surround racing. Brunetto desires both to stop and to keep moving. His image has been partly erased, making his identity difficult to distinguish, but it has also been blended with that of the man circling beside him. In the end, therefore, Brunetto is directly compared to a runner in a race, where all identities, including those of winner and loser, are mingled together.

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¹ It is tempting in this connection to invoke the other chief sense of ‘race.’ But although questions of tribal or national affiliation are central to the epics I discuss, the notion of racial identity (which may be anachronistic in any case) is seldom in play.

² William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth, 1977).

³ The OED gives a separate entry for the expression (sv ‘race,’ n¹, 4a), but then declares that ‘The metaphor of life as a race is now more commonly understood as a figurative use’ of the usual sense of ‘race,’ as a competition to finish first.

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*, ed. John Colman (Princeton, 1976), p. 86.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Cambridge, 2003).

⁶ Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth, 1986).

⁷ *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn (1987).

⁸ *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, ed. Archie Burnett (Oxford, 1997).

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and tr. James Strachey (1961).

Note that it is the child’s desire to freeze time that Freud associates with the death instinct, whereas the desire to grow up (to change, to differ) is an instance of the life instinct. But the important point is that children, and adults as well, do indeed exhibit an instinctive drive toward an end.

¹⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York, 1984).

¹¹ See Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 38-95. Smith observes that a repeated feature, such as couplet-rhyme, both

‘strengthens closure in the isolated couplet’ and also serves as ‘a force for continuation’ in the poem as a whole (p. 48).

¹² Yet a successful novel (or narrative of any kind) does, according to Brooks, constantly hold out the *possibility* of an immediate ending: ‘It is characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge, of short-circuit’ (p. 109).

¹³ Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951); all quotations from the *Iliad* refer to this translation, which generally keeps the lineation of the Greek.

¹⁴ See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949), pp. 89-104, on the relation between sport and war; Huizinga also considers the relation of play to poetry, pp. 119-35. Many critics have discussed the role of sport in ancient epic; for a good recent account, which touches on many of the issues addressed in this essay, see Helen Lovatt, *Statius and Epic Games: Sport, Politics and Poetics in the Thebaid* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹⁵ There are other competitions in which the men do not directly confront each other, such as archery and spear-throwing, but they are all sports in which contestants take turns (and so watch each other compete). Racing is unique in having opponents compete simultaneously without facing one another.

¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (New York, 1967).

¹⁷ The practice of describing poetic meter and rhythm in terms of ‘feet,’ as well as other terms implying running or similar movements, is ancient, and it has only grown with time – as with the Renaissance addition of the term ‘enjambment’ (straddling or striding).

¹⁸ The song Demodocus sings before the games concerns an argument between Achilles and Odysseus that marks the symbolic start of the Trojan War. The song he sings after, recounting the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares, seems quite dissociated from martial concerns; but it too suggests the origins of the war (the adultery of Helen and Paris), only retold at one remove, as comedy.

¹⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn (1998).

²⁰ Virgil makes use of these same tropes even before the *Aeneid*, in the tale of the poet Orpheus and his wife Eurydice that concludes the fourth Georgic. The climax of that story hinges upon the fact that because Eurydice is pacing behind him, Orpheus cannot see her. When he turns to confirm her identity, her image dissolves into thin air.

²¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, tr. C. Day Lewis (Oxford, 1952); the line numbers I give refer to the original, since Day Lewis's translation does not have them.

²² This exchange of armor, which echoes those between Glaucus and Diomedes and between Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*, is repeated by Euryalus in book 9, and then by Turnus, whose decision to wear the belt of the slain Pallas is the immediate cause of his death at the hands of Aeneas at the very end of the poem.

²³ See L. P. Wilkinson, *Golden Latin Artistry* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 89-96, 118-32.

²⁴ The swift-footed maiden Atalanta, for instance, who challenges all her suitors to a race (book 10), remarks upon how much her competitor Hippomenes looks like a girl.

²⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. A. D. Melville (Oxford, 1986); all translations from Ovid, unless otherwise noted, are from this edition. Line numbers refer to the original.

²⁶ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, tr. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley, 1980); all quotations from Dante refer to this edition. Line numbers refer to the translation, which adheres closely

to the lineation of the original. Quotations in Italian refer to the same edition, which prints the original and the translation on facing pages.

²⁷ In the same canto Dante and Virgil too come to resemble racers. Walking for once not abreast but single file – ‘one went before, one after’ (23.2) – they begin to feel their identities merge. In response to a question from Dante, Virgil says “‘Were I a leaded mirror, / I could not gather in your outer image / more quickly than I have received your inner. // For even now your thoughts have joined my own; / in both our acts and aspects we are kin” (23.25-29). This merging is appropriate since the two feel that they are engaged in a ‘chase’ (*caccia*, 23.33). Virgil’s comparison of himself to a ‘leaded mirror’ (*piombato vetro*) also blurs the distinction between himself and the sinners in lead cloaks (*cappe ... dentro tutte piombo*, 23.61-65) who will soon be moving alongside him.

²⁸ Although Dante never read Homer’s poem, both tropes became traditional and reappear in works Dante would have known, including not only Ovid but Statius (whom Dante places in Purgatory among the saved); see Statius, *Thebaid* 6.438-39, 603-5.

²⁹ T.S. Eliot imitates the Brunetto episode at length in section 2 of ‘Little Gidding,’ emphasizing the themes of unrecognizability and indistinguishability; thus Eliot’s Brunetto figure refers to moving ‘Between two worlds become much like each other.’ ‘Between two worlds’ recalls Matthew Arnold’s use of the same phrase in ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (which Eliot greatly admired), a poem that concludes with a group of people racing after a banner. Racing imagery makes many appearances in Arnold’s poetry, most memorably in ‘The Buried Life,’ a meditation upon the uncertainty of identity, which compares life to a ‘hot race / Wherein [man] doth for ever chase / That flying and elusive shadow, rest.’ But examples of these tropes are inexhaustible.