

ONCE AGAIN THE BOVINE'S LAMENT

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I

I should like to begin by citing a passage from the *Greater Bundahišn*, a Pahlavi text of the 9th Century CE, that describes a fascinating post-mortem journey through the celestial regions. Among the prime points of interest is the fact that this journey is said to have been made, not by any human or divine agent, but rather by an animal: the soul of the Primordial Ox. The text reads as follows:

«This also is said [in the Avesta]: "When the Primordial Ox passed away, it fell on its right side; when Gayēmarḍ [the Primordial Man] died, he fell on his left side." The soul (ruwān) of the Primordial Ox went out from its body and stood before the ox. And as if a hundred men spoke with a single voice, it lamented to the Wise Lord (Ohrmazd), saying: "Who has the leadership of creatures when the earth lies quaking, when the plants are dry, and when the water is afflicted? Where is that man whom you said: 'I will create him so that he will proclaim protection'?" Then Ohrmazd said to him: "You are ill, Ox-soul. You bear the illness of the Evil Spirit (Ahriman) and the malice of the demons. If one could create that man at this time, then there would not now be this oppression from Ahriman." The Ox-soul went forth to the Star Station. He lamented in similar fashion. He went to the Moon Station and lamented in similar fashion. He lamented in similar fashion at the Sun Station. Then Ohrmazd showed them [sic] the pre-existent soul (frawahr) of Zarathustra, saying: "I will give him material existence, and he will proclaim protection." Then the Ox-soul became content and accepted, saying: "I will foster the creatures," and he agreed to return to material existence in [the form of] livestock»¹.

¹ *Greater Bundahišn* 4A.1-6 (TD Manuscript 46.3-47. 6):
ēniz gōwēd kū: ka gāw ēkdād frāz
widard pad dašn dast ōbast. Gayōmard pas ān ka
bē widard pad hōy dast [obast]. Gōšurun čiyōn ruwān-i gāw-i
ēkdād az tan-i gāw bēron mih āyēd pēš gāw
bē ēstād. čand sad mard ka pad ēk bār wāng dārēnd.
ō i Ohrmazd garzēd kū-it: *radārīh-i dām-i pad kē
bē daštān ka zamīg wizandag andar nibayēd urwar hušk
āb bēšād. kū hēd ān mard kē-t guft kū: dahōm
tā pahrēz be gōwēd. uš guft Ohrmazd kū: wēmār
hē Gōšurun az ān i gannāg mēnōg wēmārīh ud kēn i dēwān
abar burdan hē. agar ān mard andar ēn zamān frāz šāyēd
dādan gannāg mēnōg ēn stahmagīh nē bawēd hād
frāz raft Gōšurun pad star pāyag garzēd hamēwēnag
frāz tā māh pāyag ud garzēd hamēwēnag tā xwaršēd
pāyag hamēwēnag garzēd. ušān pas frawahr i zarduxšt

As has been generally recognized, this passage draws on an old Indo-Iranian set of myths, in which a representative of the bovine species cries out in protest against the violence that cattle suffer²: being killed, struck, stolen, and eaten are among the specific complaints voiced in one of the other Iranian variants that have come down to us³, and yet another speaks of «*furor, raiding, cruelty, audacity, and strength*»⁴. These versions, however, do not connect the action to the cosmogonic drama, nor do they have the bovine make a celestial ascent in order to voice its complaints⁵.

To be sure, the creation story recounted in other chapters of the *Bundahišn* tells that the Primordial Ox moved into the heavens after its death⁶, but even here some important differences should be noted. First, there is no mention of a lament. Second, it is not the bovine's soul that made the voyage, but its body (*tan*) or, according to most versions, crucial parts of its body: above all, its semen (*šusar* or *tēhmag*). This bodily essence, so it is told, was rescued by Ohrmazd and placed in the moon for safekeeping, from whence it is used to create all the good and productive animal species that are called «*beneficent cattle*» (*gē-spand*) as a result. Third, the Ox's itinerary did not pass through multiple celestial realms, but went to the moon and the moon only.

This story actually forms part of a much broader narrative that begins when Ohrmazd created six original entities: Sky, then in sequence, Water, Earth, Vegetation, the Primordial Ox, and the Primordial Man, each of which was then attacked by Ahriman in the same order that they were created. Most sources describe the results of this assault in terms of mixture or corruption, telling how entities that were originally pure and perfect

*be nimūd kū: be dahōm ō gētīg kē pahrēz be
gowēd. hunsand būd Gōšurun ud padīrēd kū dām
be parwarōm kū pad gōspand abāz ō gētīg dahišnīh
hamdādestān būd.*

² Note also *Yasna* 29 (composed circa 1000 BCE), *Yašt* 10.38, 10.84-87, 15.1, and the Ossetic story discussed by Georges DUMÉZIL, “À propos de la plainte de l'âme du bœuf (*Yasna* 29)”, *Bulletin de l'Académie royale de Belgique, Classes des Lettres* 51 (1965): 42-43. The secondary literature is large, and includes most prominently Herman LOMMEL, “*Yasna* 29: die Klage des Rindes”, *Zeitschrift für Iranologie und Iranistik* 10 (1935): 96-115, J.C. TAVADIA, *Indo-Iranian Studies*, Vol. 2 (Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati, 1952), pp. 27-75, Marijan MOLÉ, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963), pp. 193-202, DUMÉZIL, “À propos de la plainte de l'âme du bœuf (*Yasna* 29)”, *Idem, Les dieux souverains des indo-européens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), pp. 127-131, Jacques DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, “On the Complaint of the Ox-Soul”, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1 (1973): 101-104, Bruce LINCOLN, “The Myth of the ‘Bovine’s Lament’”, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 3 (1975): 337-362. There is a school of thought which holds that the cattle in question are metaphoric only. For refutation of this position, see Helmut HUMBACH, “Zarathustra und die Rinderschlachtung”, in *Wort und Wirklichkeit: Eugen Ludwig Rapp zum 70. Geburtstag* (Meisenheim am Glan: 1977) 2:17-29, idem, “Der metaphorische Gebrauch von av. *gau-* ‘Rind’ und die Jatakas”, *Münchener Studien zum Sprachwissenschaft* 41 (1982): 103-117.

³ *Dēnkard* 9.29.1 (Sanjana): *zadan ud ōzadan rēšēnītan ud duzīdan*. 9.29.10 provides a separate discussion of the ox's resentment at being eaten. A full transliteration and translation of this passage are available in MOLÉ, *Culte, mythe, et cosmogonie*, pp. 196-198.

⁴ *Yasna* 29.1b:

ā mā aēšāmō hazascā rāmō (ā)hišāyā dārāšcāt višcā.

⁵ The only other source in which I have found these features is *Zad Spram* 2.13-14, which appears to be an abbreviation of the *Bundahišn* account.

⁶ *Greater Bundahišn* 6E.2-3, 7.4-6, and 13.4.

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became tainted with evil; thus, for example, some of the world's water turned salt and some of the earth turned mountainous and barren⁷. *Greater Bundahišn* 7, however, puts things differently. The text reads as follows:

«It says in the religion: When Ahriman ran in, he did not take a year, a month, or a day, since he was quick. First he came to a third of this earth, second to two thirds, and third to all of this earth. Then he came to the plants, which are of Ohrmazd. He seized their bodies and bore them up to the Star Station and gave them to the stars. It is their light which the stars reflect back to the world.

As it says [in the Avesta]: "The constellations are watery in essence, earthy in essence, and plantish in essence". Those which are watery in essence [or: have the seeds of water] are Tištar (Sirius), Tarahag, Padēwar, Pēšparwēz, and the six stars which they call Parwēz (the Pleiades). They are the water stars. Those which are earthy in essence [or: have the seeds of earth] are the Great Bear and the North Star. They are the earth stars. The other constellations are plant-like in essence [or: have the seeds of plants]. Then Ahriman came to the Ox. The Ox slept toward the south, on its right side. First, its right leg was collected.

The Wise Lord took up the body and form of the Ox. He entrusted it to the moon, because the moon is the illuminator that reflects back to the world.

As it says [in the Avesta]: "The moon is the seed of livestock" (māh i gēspand tēhmag); that is, the form of cattle and livestock is in the Moon Station.

Then he came to Gayēmard [the Primordial Man]. Gayēmard slept in the south, on his left side. His left leg was also first collected.

The Wise Lord took up his body. He entrusted it to the sun, because the light of the sun shines on the world. For the Ox became just like the moon and Gayēmard became just like the sun»⁸.

⁷ See, for example, *Greater Bundahišn*, 1A.4-21, 4.10-19, 4.27-28, 5.3, 6B-D. The six original creations are listed in order in at least one Avestan text, *Yašt* 13.86.

⁸ *Greater Bundahišn* 7.1-9 (TD MS. 71.12-73.4):

gōwēd

*pad dēn kū: ka ganāgmēnōg andar dwārēd nē pad sāl ud māh
ud rōz čē tēz pad zamān be nazdist ō 3 ēk i ēn zamīg
dudīgar ō 3 2 ēk i ēn zamīg sidīgār ō ēn zamīg hamāg be
mad. pas ō urwār hast i ohrmazd ān i awēšān kirb abar grift
abar awēšān stārag pāyag burd ud frāz ō stāragān dād
hast rōšnīh awēšān stāragān kē pad abāz ō gētīg
tābēnd. čiyōn gowēd kū: axtarān i āb-čīhrag ud zamīg-čīhrag
ud urwar-čīhrag hēnd. awēšān āb-čīhrān tištar ud tarahag
padēwar ud pēšparwēz ud 6 stārag kē parwēz xwānēnd.
awēšān āb stāragān. ān i zamīg čīhr haftōringān ud meh mayān
asmān awēšān zamīg +stāragān. ān i urwar čīhr abārīg jud
az awēšān. pas ganāgmēnōg ō gāw mad. gāw ō nēmrōz arg
pad dašn dast xufsēd. nazdist ān i dašn pāy ō amburd.
ohrmazd ān i gāw tan ud ēwēnag abar grift ō i māh abespārd.
čiyōn hast ēn rōšngar māh abāz ō gēhān tābēd. čiyōn
gowēd kū: māh i gōspand tōhmag kū ēwēnag gāwān
gōspandān pad māh pāyag estēd. pas ka ō gayōmard
mād. gayōmard ō nēmrōz rōn hōy arg xufsēd ud
nazdist-iz ān i hōy pāy ō amburd. ohrmazd ān i ōy kirb
grift. ō xwaršēd abespārd. čiyōn hast ēn rōšnīh i*

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For all that these details may seem confusing, they are organized in a well ordered pattern. Thus, one can perceive in this text an ambitious attempt to establish a correlation between the sequence in which the original entities were created and the vertical order of the celestial spheres or “Stations” (*pāyag*), following the principle that the earlier an entity was created, the lower is the sphere to which its body was assigned after Ahriman's attack, as shown in Figure One.

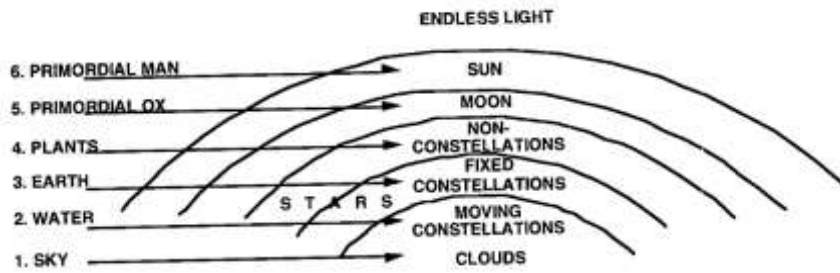


Figure One

Within this system (some details of which are supplied from other chapters of the *Bundahišn*)⁹, the highest realm, that of “Endless Light”, is reserved for the Creator, and the lower spheres are parcelled out in order to his creations. Of these, the last-created and most valued, the Primordial Man, occupied the topmost Station, that of the Sun, while his bovine companion (created fifth) was in the next highest Station, that of the Moon. Plants, which were created just before the Ox, went to the Star Station, just below the Moon. But unlike the higher Stations, that of the stars was partitioned into three subsections. In the highest of these were those stars that are not part of any constellation, and this is the locus of Plants. Lower was the realm of fixed constellations: those to the North that are visible throughout the year, and are therefore associated with solidity and stability. Here the Earth (created third) finds its home. Lower still is the realm of mobile constellations – those set on the ecliptic toward the East – which make their appearance around the beginning of the rainy season, and here the Water was placed. Finally, Sky, first of all creations, appeared at the lowest Station, that of the clouds.

Within this system – most of which is also attested in the *Avesta*¹⁰ – we find the best evidence for a tradition in which the Primordial Ox ascends to the heavens after its death.

*xwaršēd kē ō gēhān padīš tabēd. abar gāw ōwōn būd
čiyōn māh ud gayōmard ōwōn būd čiyōn xwaršēd.*

⁹ See *Greater Bundahišn* 2.1-19 and 3.7. Also helpful are cosmologic and cosmogonic discussions in other Pahlavi texts, including *Zad Spram* 1.31-33, 2.1-12, *Mēnōg i Xrād* 7.9-12, 44.7-11, and 49, *Dēnkard* 3.123, and *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* 12.5-14.20.

¹⁰ See in particular, *Yašt* 12.29-33, *Sirozē* 1.12-13 and 2.12-13. The enigmatic and much-discussed *Yasna* 32.10ac may also be relevant, if it is possible to see in this verse Zarathustra's condemnation of an attempt to homologize cattle and the sun, in violation of the proper cosmological construct whereby Human:Bovine :: Sun: Moon.

*«That man destroys the doctrines who says the worst to see
The cow and the sun with his eyes»
hvō mā nā sravā mōrandaṭ yē acištām vaēna^hē aogādā
gčm ašibyā hvarācā.*

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Here, however, the Ox is assigned to one fixed and specific locus, the moon¹¹. This locus, moreover, marks the Ox's relation to the other original creations: higher than the first four (Sky, Water, Earth, Plants, associated with the Cloud and Star Stations), but distinctly subordinate to the Primordial Man, who alone is assigned to the level of the Sun. The spatial order of the cosmos and the temporal order of the cosmogony were thus homologized to one another, and what is more, were organized in such a way as to encode a hierarchy, in which every entity both outranks and depends upon those created before it and occupying Stations beneath it, while being subordinate to and exploited by those entities that were created later and occupy Stations higher than it does itself. Plants, for example, outrank and depend on Earth, Water, and Sky, while Cattle stand in the same relation to Plants, Earth, Water, and Sky.

The system represents humans as Ohrmazd's culminating creation, and accordingly grants them the paramount position, in the Sun Station. In this fashion, it naturalizes and legitimates human domination and exploitation of all the other creations. Implicit is also the idea of a food chain, as in Figure Two, for just as plants drink water, so cattle eat plants and drink water, and so also humans consume cattle, plants, and water alike, and each eater – so it seems – may destroy its lower-ranking eaten with impunity.

E A T E N

	Humans	Cattle	Plants	Earth	Water
E	Humans	-	+	+	+
A	Cattle	-	-	+	+
T	Plants	-	-	-	+
E	Earth	-	-	-	+
R	Water	-	-	-	-

Figure Two

Still, there are cracks within this system that permit one to offer arguments against it. Thus, for example, the relation of humans to animals is not just like that of animals to plants. Whereas the aggression of cattle against plants pits a sentient being against one that is non-sentient, that of people against cattle pits one sentient being against another: *«If you must create me, at least make me without vital force, so that I will be less sensible to pain»*, pleads the Ox in another variant of its lament¹². And not only do cattle have consciousness and sensation, they also have mobility; what is more, they have a voice.

Finally we have assembled enough information to pose – and resolve – an important question: If Zoroastrian cosmology assigned the Primordial Ox to the Moon Station, why, in the version of the “Bovine’s Lament” with which we began does the Ox-soul ascend beyond the Moon to the Sun Station? In this move, is not the Ox-soul out of place? Indeed, it is, and that, I believe, is precisely the point, for as we have come to recognize, the system – which is as much ideological as cosmological – is organized to reserve the highest Station for humans, whom the system constructs as superior to the Ox and all the other creations, with the consequence that humans may act in ways that benefit them at the expense of these others: feeding on them, thereby bringing death to all and pain to the sentient.

¹¹ Although I have found no textual evidence to support this, I am inclined to suspect that tendentious and pseudo-empirical confirmation was provided for this association by reading the crescent moon as the animal’s horns.

¹² *Dēnkard* (Sanjana) 9.29.3: *ud agar-im ō gētīg brīhēnēh, ān-im uz-uštānīh hā bē dah kū amārtar bavom *i ān dušxwar dart.*

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In its speech, the Ox thus denounces the practical consequences of a hierarchic system that fosters violence, and it speaks out on behalf of all those creations which suffer under a system that defines them as its lowlier and more primitive members. Speaking to Ohrmazd himself, the Wise Lord and creator, the Ox demands security and protection for these “lesser” beings, and denouncing the “higher”:

«Who has the leadership of creatures when the earth lies quaking, when the plants are dry, and when the water is afflicted? Where is that man of whom you said: ‘I will create him so that he will proclaim protection’?»¹³

In effect, the Ox calls out for a different kind of man – one who is a protector of all the created entities, not a destroyer, one who sees himself entrusted with caring for creation, not exploiting and dominating it. Further, in the moment that it steps into the circle of the sun – the station ordinarily reserved for humans – the Ox violates the principles on which this system is organized. In effect, it is not only speaking out against, but actively contesting a hierarchy that its enemies would claim is written on the cosmos itself.

II

An interesting parallel to these Iranian materials was recently called to my attention by David Sick, an advanced graduate student at the University of Minnesota, who has compared the theme of the “Bovine’s Lament” to the episode in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus’s men – in an outrage that is only superficially disguised as a sacrifice – seize, kill, butcher and eat the cattle of Helios, thereby calling down on themselves the wrath of the gods¹⁴. Mr. Sick’s analysis centers on the role of the sun in both traditions, and I will leave it to him to make his own case. Still, there is a detail in the Homeric text that falls outside Sick’s argument, but strikes me as worthy of comment. This is the specification that after the cattle had been killed,

*«Straightaway, the gods revealed portents to the men.
The hides crept about and the meat on the spits -
The raw and the cooked – lowed (memukei), as if a voice
were born from the cattle»¹⁵.*

¹³ *Greater Bundahišn* 4A.2 (TD MS. 46.8-11):

**radārīh-ī dām-ī pad kē
bē daštān ka zamīg wizandag andar nibayēd urwar hušk
āb bēšād. kū hēd ān mard kē-t guft kū: dahōm
tā pahrēz be gōwēd.*

¹⁴ David SICK, “Cattle, Sacrifice, and the Sun: A Mythic Cycle in Greece, Iran, and India”, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, Dept. of Classics, 1996. The text in question is *Odyssey* 12.260-402, on which see also the discussions of Pierre VIDAL-NAQUET, “Valeurs religieuses et mythiques de la terre et du sacrifice dans l’*Odyssee*”, *Annales E.S.C.* 25 (1970): 1278-97, esp. 1288-89, Jean-Pierre VERNANT, “Manger aux pays du Soleil”, in J-P. VERNANT & M. DETIENNE, eds., *La cuisine du sacrifice* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 239-249, and Alfred HEUBECK & Arie HOEKSTRA, eds., *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey*, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.132-140. Enrico CAMPANILE, “I bovi del sole iperione”, *Incontri Linguistici* 11 (1986): 25-30, is so reminiscent of Friedrich Max Müller’s long-discredited theory of myth as a “disease of language” that it hardly merits discussion.

¹⁵ *Odyssey* 12.394-396:

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Here, as in the Iranian materials, we have bovine voices that call out after suffering a violent death at human hands. In the above translation, I have rendered the verb *mūkáomai* rather blandly, in accord with its etymology and its usage in Attic Greek, where it has the sense 'to low', 'to bellow', 'to moo'¹⁶. But given its usage throughout the Homeric epics, it is possible to be more precise. In addition to the passage quoted above, the term occurs seven times. In four, inanimate objects are the subject that govern the verb, but even here *mūkáomai* describes a noise made in response to a violent action. Thus, it is used once – and once only, in all the battle scenes of the *Iliad* – for the sound the greatest of shields made when struck and torn by the mightiest of spears. The shield in question was that which Hephaestus forged for Achilles and the spear, that of Aineias, which he thrust so powerfully that Achilles this once suffered fear, believing it would easily tear through his armor. And although the shield held, still «*it groaned mightily (mega... mūke) around the lance's point*»¹⁷.

Elsewhere, the verb is used twice for the shrill sound its hinges make – squealing or shrieking – as the massive doors of heaven swing open quickly to let Athene's chariot pass¹⁸. Related is the passage where Hector stands before the Greek defensive walls and hefts a stone so huge that no other mortal could budge it.

«*Advancing, he stood close by, and he threw at the middle leaning into the throw,
With his legs spread wide so that his cast would not lack force.
It smashed the hinges on either side. The stone fell heavily,
And the gates groaned mightily (mega...mūkon), as the bolts could not
Hold, and the boards splintered
Under the stone's impact*»¹⁹.

In the three remaining occurrences of *mūkáomai*, living beings are the subject governing the verb. One of these beings is a bovine, who cries out in the agony that separates life from death, vainly seeking help against those who assault it.

«*Two fearsome lions among the cattle*«*Two fearsome lions among the cattle*»
Had seized a bellowing bull, and he – groaning loudly (makra memūkōs)

τοῖσιν δ' αὐτίκ' ἔπειτα θεοὶ τέραρα προύφαινον·
εἶρπον μὲν ῥινοί, κρέα δ' ἄμφ' ὄβελοῖσι μεμύκει,
ὀπταλέα τε καὶ ὠμά, βοῶν δ' ὧς γίγνετο φωνή.

¹⁶ Henry George LIDDELL and Robert SCOTT *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 1151. The etymology is from Proto-Indo-European **mū-k-*, a guttural-extension of the root that offers an onomatopoeic approximation of sounds made with the lips pressed together and forward (cf. Lithuanian *mūkiù, mūkti*, Russian *мычѣть*, Middle High German *mūhen*). Julius POKORNY, *Indogermanische etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1959), pp. 751-752.

¹⁷ *Iliad* 20.260:

μέγα δ' ἄμφι σάκος μύκε δουρὸς ἀκωκῆ.

¹⁸ *Iliad* 5.749 and 8.393, which are formulaically identical.

¹⁹ *Iliad* 12.457-462:

στῆ δὲ μάλ' ἐγγὺς ἰών, καὶ ἐρεισάμενος βάλε μέσσοα
εὖ διαβάς, ἵνα μὴ οἱ ἀφανρότερον βέλος εἶη,
ῥῆξε δ' ἀπ' ἀμφοτέρους θαιρούς· πέσε δὲ λίθος εἶσω
βριθοσύνη, μέγα δ' ἄμφι πύλαι μύκον, οὐδ' ἄρ' ὄχηες
ἔσχεθέτην, σανίδες δὲ διέτμαγεν ἄλλυδις ἄλλη
λαὸς ὑπὸ ῥιπῆς·

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*Was being dragged off. The dogs pursued him, as did the young men.
The lions had rent the hide of the great bull,
And were gulping down its organs and its black blood, as the herdsmen
Roused the swift dogs and set them after them,
But these declined to bite the lions.
Standing close by, they barked, but kept out of the way»²⁰.*

Finally, the verb is used twice with reference to other beings, whose anguished vocalizations are explicitly compared to those of cattle. Thus, Odysseus's men weep when they first see him after their period of porcine incarnation, and on this occasion – recalling what they suffered as animals, and relieved at their rescue from that state – they are said to *mūkáomai* like calves too long separated from their mothers²¹. Again, when the river-god Scamander reacts to the carnage wrought by Achilles, it does so as follows:

*«Running fast, it rushed at him with a surge
And stirred itself, rousing all its streams as it pushed away the many
Corpses killed by Achilles, which lay thick within it.
These it cast onto the land roaring like a bull (memūkōs ēute tauros),
And the living it saved under its fair streams,
Hiding them in deep, great eddies»²².*

Consistent in these last three examples is the sense that when gods or people *mūkáomai*, they employ a voice that is less than articulate in order to express sufferings that lie beyond the boundary of words or the experience of the human. They speak, in fact, like animals: like animals in pain or near the point of death. Objects, too, can *mūkáomai*, but only when they are under the greatest of stress: when they, like these gods, people, and cattle, respond to the acts of extreme violence that are inflicted upon them. Sometimes they survive, as in the case of Odysseus's men or Achilles shield; but sometimes, like the meat on the spits, the bull hunted by lions or the Greek gates, they cry out in protest against the deeds that destroy them.

²⁰ *Iliad* 18.579-586, which describes a scene on the shield of Achilles:

σμερδαλέω δὲ λέοντε δύ' ἐν πρώτῃσι βόεσσι
ταῦρον ἐρύγμηλον ἐχέτην· ὁ δὲ μακρὰ μεμυκῶς
ἔλκετο· τὸν δὲ κύνες μετεκίαθον ἠδ' αἰζηοί.
τῷ μὲν ἀναρρήξαντε βοὸς μέγαλοιο βοεΐην
ἔγκατα καὶ μέλαν αἶμα λαφύσσετον· οἱ δὲ νομῆες
αὐτῶς ἐνδίσσαν ταχέας κύνας ὀτρύνοντες.
οἱ δ' ἦτοι δακέειν μὲν ἀπετρωπῶντο λεόντων,
ιστάμενοι δὲ μάλ' ἐγγὺς ὑλάκτεον ἔκ τ' ἀλέοντο.

²¹ *Odyssey* 10.410-415.

²² *Iliad* 21.234-239:

ὁ δ' ἐπέσσυτο οἴδματι θύων,
πάντα δ' ὄρινε ρέεθρα κυκώμενος, ὥσπερ δὲ νεκροὺς
πολλοὺς, οἳ ῥα κατ' αὐτὸν ἄλις ἔσαν, οὓς κτάν' Ἀχιλλεύς
τοὺς ἐκβαλλε θύραζε μεμυκῶς ἠύτε ταῦρος
χέρσον δέ· ζωοὺς δὲ σάω κατὰ καλὰ ρέεθρα,
κρύπτων ἐν δίνῃσι βαθειῇσιν μεγάλῃσι.

THE BOVINE'S LAMENT

III

In the years when I knew Ioan Culianu best – we were students together for a brief time during the middle 1970s, and remained in touch until 1980 or thereabouts – I would have been tempted to argue for a genetic connection between the Iranian myth of the “Bovine’s Lament” and the Homeric account of Helios’s cattle, and to understand them as common descendants of some posited “Proto-Indo-European” original. More recently, however, my interests have changed, and no longer does the attempt to reconstruct proto-myths or proto-civilizations strike me as a particularly interesting or worthy endeavor²³.

Whether or not there is any historic connection among these mythic materials, I now believe, matters much less than the powerful way in which they address a common theme: a problem rooted in the social reality that was shared by the people who told and listened to these stories. Nor is that problem limited to the ancient populations of Greece and Iran; rather, it is common to a great many other societies, and those who know it are able to listen to these stories with sensitivity and understanding. It is this which gives them their continuing interest and abiding appeal.

The problem of which I speak, obviously enough, is that of violence: the violence that falls on the weaker, gentler, and more peaceful beings within creation, often with lethal force; the violence of humans against animals, and of those who consider themselves high against those whom they succeed in defining as low. Such violence is real, so these myths tell us, and equally real is the response of the victims, who cry out in pain, and also in protest. They cry out in their own proper places, and they cry out in places that are normally reserved for the aggressors. They cry out before, during, and after the events of which they speak, as souls in heaven (Bovine’s Lament), dead meat on earth (Helios’s cattle), or simply as the memories of those we have known. In such moments, it is incumbent that we hear and respect these voices; further, that we add our voices to theirs and cry out in lamentation and protest.

²³ I have discussed the reasons for this shift in *Death, War, and Sacrifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. XIII-XXI and 119-127.