The March of Folly

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The most famous story of the Western world, the prototype of all tales of human conflict, the epic that belongs to all people and all times since — and even before — literacy began, contains the legend, with or without some vestige of historical foundation, of the Wooden Horse.

The Trojan War has supplied themes to all subsequent literature and art from Euripides’ heart-rending tragedy of The Trojan Women to Eugene O’Neill, Jean Giraudoux and the still-enthralled writers of our time. Through Aeneas in Virgil’s sequel, it provided the legendary founder and national epic of Rome. A favourite of medieval romancers, it supplied William Caxton with the subject of the first book printed in English, and Chaucer, (and later Shakespeare) with the setting, if not the story, of Troilus and Cressida. Racine and Goethe tried to fathom the miserable sacrifice of Iphigenia. Wandering Ulysses inspired writers as far apart as Tennyson and James Joyce. Cassandra and avenging Electra have been made the protagonists of German drama and opera. Some thirty-five poets and scholars have offered English translations since George Chapman in Elizabethan times first opened the realms of gold. Countless painters have found the Judgment of Paris an irresistible scene, and as many poets have fallen under the spell of the beauty of Helen.

All of human experience is in the tale of Troy, or Ilium, first put into epic form by Homer around 850-800 B.C. Although the gods are its motivators, what it tells us about humanity is basic, even though — or perhaps because — the circumstances are ancient and primitive. It has endured deep in our minds and memories for twenty-eight centuries because it speaks to us of ourselves, not least when least rational. It mirrors, in the judgment of another storyteller, John Cowper Powys, “what happened, is happening and will happen to us all, from the very beginning until the end of human life upon this earth.”

Troy falls at last after ten years of futile, indecisive, noble, mean, tricky, bitter, jealous and only occasionally heroic battle. As the culminating instrumentality for the fall, the story brings in the Wooden Horse. The episode of the Horse exemplifies policy pursued contrary to self-interest — in the face of urgent warning and a feasible alternative. Occurring in this earliest chronicle of Western man, it suggests that such pursuit is an old and inherent human habit. The story first appears not in the Iliad, which ends before the climax of the war, but in the Odyssey, through the mouth of the blind bard Demodocus, who, at Odysseus’ bidding, recounts the exploit to the group gathered in the palace of Alcinous. Despite Odysseus’ high praise of the bard’s narrative talents, the story is told rather baldly, as if the main facts were already familiar. Minor details are added elsewhere in the poem by Odysseus himself and in what seems an impossible flight of fancy by two other participants, Helen and Menelaus.

Lifted by Homer out of dim mists and memories, the Wooden Horse instantly caught the imagination of his successors in the next two or three centuries and inspired them to elaborate on the episode, notably and importantly by the addition of Laocoön in one of
the most striking incidents of the entire epic. He appears earliest in *The Sack of Ilium* by Arctinus of Miletus, composed probably a century or so after Homer. Personifying the Voice of Warning, Laocoön’s dramatic role becomes central to the episode of the Horse in all versions thereafter.

The full story, as we know it, of the device which finally accomplished the fall of Troy took shape in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, completed in 20 B.C. By that time the tale incorporated the accumulated versions of more than a thousand years. Arising from geographically separate districts of the Greek world, the various versions are full of discrepancies and inconsistencies. Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory. Incidents do not conform necessarily to narrative logic; motive and behaviour are often irreconcilable. We must take the story of the Wooden Horse as it comes, as Aeneas told it to the enraptured Dido, and as it passed, with further revisions and embellishments by Latin successors, to the Middle Ages and from the medieval romancers to us.

It is the ninth year of inconclusive battle on the plains of Troy, where the Greeks are besieging the city of King Priam. The gods are intimately involved with the belligerents as a result of jealousies generated ten years earlier when Paris, Prince of Troy, offended Hera and Athena by giving the golden apple as the award of beauty to Aphrodite, goddess of love. Not playing fair (as the Olympians, moulded by men, were not disposed to), she had promised him, if he gave her the prize, the most beautiful woman in the world as his bride. This led, as everyone knows, to Paris’ abduction of Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, and the forming of a federation under his brother, the Greek overlord Agamemnon, to enforce her return. War followed when Troy refused.

Taking sides and playing favourites, potent but fickle, conjuring deceptive images, altering the fortunes of battle to suit their desires, whispering, tricking, falsifying, even inducing the Greeks through deceit to continue when they are ready to give up and go home, the gods keep the combatants engaged while heroes die and homelands suffer. Poseidon, ruler of the sea, who, with Apollo, was said to have built Troy and its walls, has turned against the Trojans because their first king failed to pay him for his work and further because they have stoned to death a priest of his cult for failure to offer sacrifices necessary to arouse the waves against the Greek invasion. Apollo, on the other hand, still favours Troy as its traditional protector, the more so because Agamemnon has angered him by seizing the daughter of a priest of Apollo for his bed. Athena, busiest and most influential of all, is unforgivingly anti-Trojan and pro-Greek because of Paris’ original offence. Zeus, ruler of Olympus, is not a strong partisan, and when appealed to by one or another of his extended family, is capable of exercising his influence on either side.

In rage and despair, Troy mourns the death of Hector, slain by Achilles, who brutally drags his corpse by the heels three times around the walls in the dust of his chariot wheels. The Greeks are no better off. The angry Achilles, their champion fighter, shot in his vulnerable heel by Paris with a poisoned arrow, dies. His armour, to be conferred on the most deserving of the Greeks, is awarded to Odysseus, the wisest, instead of to Ajax, the most valorous, whereupon Ajax, maddened by insulted pride, kills himself. His companions’ spirits fail and many of the Greek host counsel departure, but Athena puts a stop to that. On her advice, Odysseus proposes a last effort to take Troy by a stratagem — the building of a wooden horse large enough to hold twenty or fifty (or in some versions, as many as three hundred) armed men concealed inside. His plan is for the rest of the army to pretend to sail for home while in fact hiding their ships offshore behind the island of Tenedos. The Wooden Horse will carry an inscription dedicating it to
Athena as the Greeks’ offering in the hope of her aid in ensuring their safe return home. The figure is intended to excite the veneration of the Trojans, to whom the horse is a sacred animal and who may well be moved to conduct it to their own temple of Athena within the city. If so, the sacred veil said to surround and protect the city will be torn apart, the concealed Greeks will emerge, open the gates to their fellows, summoned by signal, and seize their final opportunity.

In obedience to Athena, who appears to one Epeius in a dream with orders to build the Horse, the “thing of guile” is completed in three days, aided by the goddess’ “divine art.” Odysseus persuades the rather reluctant leaders and bravest soldiers to enter by rope ladder during the night and take their places “halfway between victory and death” At dawn, Trojan scouts discover that the siege is lifted and the enemy gone, leaving only the strange and awesome figure at their gates. Priam and his council come out to examine it and fall into anxious and divided discussion. Taking the inscription at face value, Thymoetes, one of the elders, recommends bringing the Horse to Athena’s temple in the citadel. “Knowing better,” Capys, another of the elders, objects, saying Athena had for too long favoured the Greeks, and Troy would be well advised either to burn the pretended offering at once or break it open with brazen axes to see what the belly contains. Here was the feasible alternative.

Hesitant, yet fearful of desecrating Athena’s property, Priam decides in favour of bringing the Horse into the city, although the walls must be breached or, in another version, the lintel of the Scaean Gate removed to allow it to enter. This is the first warning omen, for it has been prophesied that if ever the Scaean lintel is taken down, Troy will fall.

Excited voices from the gathering crowd cry, “Burn it! Hurl it over the rocks into the sea! Cut it open!” Opponents shout as loudly in favour of preserving what they take to be a sacred image. Then occurs a dramatic intervention. Laocoön, a priest of Apollo’s temple, comes rushing down from the citadel crying in alarm, “Are you mad, wretched people? Do you think the foe has gone? Do you think gifts of the Greeks lack treachery? What was Odysseus’ reputation?

“Either the Greeks are hiding in this monster, 
Or it’s some trick of war, a spy or engine, 
To come down on the city. Tricky business 
Is hiding in it. Do not trust it, Trojans; 
Do not believe this horse. Whatever it may be, 
I fear the Greeks, even when bringing gifts.”

With that warning which has echoed down the ages, he flings his spear with all his strength at the Horse, in whose flank it sticks quivering and setting off a moaning sound from the frightened souls within. The blow almost split the wood and let light into the interior, but fate or the gods blunted it; or else, as Aeneas says later, Troy would still be standing.

Just as Laocoön has convinced the majority, guards drag in Sinon, an ostensibly terrified Greek who pretends he has been left behind through the enmity of Odysseus, but who has actually been planted by Odysseus as part of his plan. Asked by Priam to tell the truth about the Wooden Horse, Sinon swears it is a genuine offering to Athena which the Greeks deliberately made huge so the Trojans would not take it into their city because that would signify an ultimate Trojan victory. If the Trojans destroy it they will doom themselves, but if they bring it inside they will ensure their city’s safety.
Swung around by Sinon’s story, the Trojans are wavering between the warning and the false persuasion when a fearful portent convinces them that Laocoön is wrong. Just as he cautions that Sinon’s tale is another trick put into his mouth by Odysseus, two horrible serpents rise in gigantic black spirals out of the waves and advance across the sands,

Their burning eyes suffused with blood and fire,
Their darting tongues licking their hissing mouths.

As the crowd watches paralysed in terror, they make straight for Laocoön and his two young sons, “fastening their fangs in those poor bodies,” coiling around the father’s waist and neck and arms and, as he utter strangled inhuman cries, crush him to death. The appalled watchers are now nearly all moved to believe that the ghastly event is Laocoön’s punishment for sacrilege in striking what must indeed be a sacred offering.

Troublesome even to the ancient poets, the serpents have defied explanation; myth has its mysteries too, not always resolved. Some narrators say they were sent by Poseidon at Athena’s request to prove that his animus against the Trojans was equal to hers. Others say they were sent by Apollo to warn the Trojans of approaching doom (although, since the effect worked the other way, this seems to have a built-in illogic). Virgil’s explanation is that Athena herself was responsible in order to convince the Trojans of Sinon’s story, thus sealing their doom, and in confirmation he has the serpents take refuge in her temple after the event. So difficult was the problem of the serpents that some collaborators of the time suggested that Laocoön’s fate had nothing to do with the Wooden Horse, but was owed to the quite extraneous sin of profaning Apollo’s temple by sleeping with his wife in front of the god’s image.

The blind bard of the Odyssey, who knows nothing of Laocoön, simply states that the argument in favour of welcoming the Horse had to prevail because Troy was ordained to perish — or, as we might interpret it, that mankind in the form of Troy’s citizens is addicted to pursuing policy contrary to self-interest.

The instrumentality of the serpents is not a fact of history to be explained, but a work of imagination, one of the most forceful ever described. It produced, in agonized and twisted marble, so vivid that the victims’ cries seem almost to be heard, a major masterpiece of classical sculpture. Seeing it in the palace of the Emperor Titus in Rome, Pliny the Elder thought it a work to be preferred “above all that the arts of painting and sculpture have produced.” Yet the statue is dumb as to cause and significance. Sophocles wrote a tragedy on the theme of Laocoön but the text disappeared and his thoughts are lost. The existence of the legend can tell us only one thing: that Laocoön was fatally punished for perceiving the truth and warning of it.

While on Priam’s orders ropes and rollers are prepared to pull the Horse into the city, unnamed forces still try to warn Troy. Four times at the Gate’s threshold, the Horse comes to a halt and four times from the interior the clang of arms sounds, yet though the halts are an omen, the Trojans press on, “heedless and blind with frenzy.” They breach the walls and the Gate, unconcerned at thus tearing the sacred veil because they believe its protection is no longer needed. In post-Aeneid versions, other portents follow: smoke rises stained with blood, tears flow from the statues of the gods, towers groan as if in pain, mist covers the stars, wolves and jackals howl, laurel withers in the temple of Apollo, but the Trojans take no alarm. Fate drives fear from their minds “so that they might meet their doom and be destroyed.”
That night they celebrate, feasting and drinking with carefree hearts. A last chance and a last warning are offered. Cassandra, Priam’s daughter, possesses the gift of prophecy conferred on her by Apollo, who, on falling in love with her, gave it in exchange for her promise to lie with him. When Cassandra, dedicating herself to virginity, went back on her promise, the offended god added to his gift a curse providing that her prophecies would never be believed. Ten years before, when Paris first sailed for Sparta, Cassandra had indeed foretold that his voyage would bring doom upon his house, but Priam had paid no attention. “O miserable people,” she now cries, “poor fools, you do not understand at all your evil fate.” They are acting senselessly, she tells them, toward the very thing “that has your destruction within it.” Laughing and drunken, the Trojans tell her she talks too much “windy nonsense.” In the fury of the seer ignored, she seizes an axe and a burning brand and rushes at the Wooden Horse but is restrained before she can reach it.

Heavy with wine, the Trojans sleep. Sinon creeps from the hall and opens the trap door of the Horse to release Odysseus and his companions, some of whom, cooped up in the blackness, have been weeping under the tension and “trembling in their legs.” They spread through the city to open the remaining gates while Sinon signals to the ships with a flaming torch. In ferocious triumph when the forces are joined, the Greeks fall upon the sleeping foe, slaughtering right and left, burning houses, looting treasure, raping the women. Greeks die too as the Trojans wield the ir swords, but the advantage has been gained by the invaders. Everywhere the dark blood flows, hacked corpses cover the ground, the crackle of flames rises over the shrieks and groans of the wounded and the wailing of women.

The tragedy is total; no heroics or pity mitigate the end. Achilles’ son Pyrrhus (also called Neoptolemus), “mad with murder”, pursues the wounded and fleeing Polites, Priam’s youngest son, down a corridor of the palace and, “eager for the last thrust”, hacks off his head in the sight of his father. When venerable Priam, slipping in his son’s blood, flings a feeble spear, Pyrrhus kills him too. The wives and mothers of the defeated are dragged off in indignity to be allotted to the enemy chiefs along with other booty. Hecuba the Queen falls to Odysseus, Hector’s wife, Andromache, to the murderer Pyrrhus. Cassandra, raped by another Ajax in the temple of Athena, is dragged out with hair flying and hands bound to be given to Agamemnon and ultimately to kill herself rather than serve his lust. Worse is the fate of Polyxena, another daughter of Priam once desired by Achilles and now demanded by his shade, who is sacrificed on his tomb by the victors. The crowning pity is reserved for the child Astyanax, son of Hector and Andromache, who on Odysseus’ orders that no hero’s son shall survive to seek vengeance, is hurled from the battlements to his death. Sacked and burned, Troy is left in ruins. Mount Ida groans; the River Xanthus weeps.

Singing of their victory that has ended the long war at last, the Greeks board their ships, offering prayers to Zeus for a safe return home. Few obtain it, but rather, through a balancing fate, suffer disaster parallel to that of their victims. Athena, enraged by the rapist’s profanation of her temple, or because the Greeks, careless in victory, have failed to offer prayers to her, asks Zeus for the right to punish them and, given lightning and thunderbolts, raises the sea to a storm. Ships founder and sink or are smashed on the rocks, island shores are strewn with wrecks and the sea with floating corpses. The second Ajax is among those drowned; Odysseus, blown off course, is storm-tossed, shipwrecked and lost for twenty years; arriving home, Agamemnon is murdered by his faithless wife and her lover. The bloodthirsty Pyrrhus is killed by Orestes at Delphi. Curiously, Helen, the cause of it all, survives untouched in perfect beauty, to be forgiven
by the bewitched Menelaus and to regain royal husband, home and prosperity. Aeneas
too escapes. Because of his filial devotion in carrying his aged father on his back after
the battle, he is allowed by Agamemnon to embark with his followers and follow the
destiny that will lead him to Rome. With the circular justice that man likes to impose
upon history, a survivor of Troy founds the city-state that will conquer Troy's conquerors.

How much fact lies behind the Trojan epic? Archaeologists, as we know, have
uncovered nine levels of an ancient settlement on the Asian shore of the Hellespont, or
Dardanelles, opposite Gallipoli. Its site at the crossroads of Bronze Age trade routes
would invite raids and sack and account for the evidence at different levels of frequent
demolition and rebuilding. Level VIIA, containing fragments of gold and other artefacts of
a royal city, and exhibiting signs of having been violently destroyed by human hands, has
been identified as Priam's Troy and its fall dated near the end of the Bronze Age,
around 1200 B.C. It is quite possible that Greek mercantile and maritime ambitions came
into conflict with Troy and that the overlord of the several communities of the Greek
peninsula could have gathered allies for a concerted attack on the city across the straits.
The abduction of Helen, as Robert Graves suggests, may have been real in its retaliation
for some prior Greek raid.

These were Mycenaean times in Greece, when Agamemnon, son of Atreus, was king at
Mycenae in the citadel with the Lion Gate. Its dark remains still stand on a hill just south
of Corinth where poppies spring so deeply red they seem forever stained by the blood of
the Atridae. Some violent cause, in roughly the same age as the fall of Troy but probably
over a more extended period, ended the primacy of Mycenae and of Knossos in Crete
with which it was linked. Mycenaean culture was literate, as we now know, since the script
called Linear B found in the ruins of Knossos has been identified as an early form of
Greek.

The period following the Mycenaean collapse is a shadowy void of some two centuries
called the Greek Dark Ages, whose only communication to us is through shards and
artefacts. For some unexplained reason, written language seems to have vanished
completely, although recitals of the exploits of ancestors of a past heroic age were
clearly transmitted orally down the generations. Recovery, stimulated by the arrival of the
Dorian people from the north, began around the tenth century B.C. and from that
recovery burst the immortal celebrator whose epic fashioned from familiar tales and
legends of his people started the stream of Western literature.

Homer is generally pictured as reciting his narrative poems to accompaniment on the
lyre, but the 16,000 lines of the *Iliad* and 12,000 of the *Odyssey* were certainly also
either written down by himself or dictated by him to a scribe. Texts were undoubtedly
available to the several bards of the next two or three centuries who, in supplementary
tales of Troy, introduced material from oral tradition to fill in the gaps left by Homer.
The sacrifice of Iphigenia, Achilles' vulnerable heel, the appearance of Penthesilea, queen
of the Amazons, as an ally of Troy and many of the most memorable episodes belong to
these poems of the post-Homeric cycle which have come down to us only through
summaries made in the second century A.D. of texts since lost. The *Cypria*, named for
Cyprus, home of its supposed author, is the fullest and earliest of these, followed by,
among others, *The Sack of Ilium* by Arctinus and the *Little Iliad* by a bard of Lesbos.
After them, lyric poets and the three great tragic dramatists took up the Trojan themes,
and Greek historians discussed the evidence. Latin authors elaborated further both before
and especially after Virgil, adding jewelled eyes for the Wooden Horse and other glittering
fables. Distinction between history and fable faded when the heroes of Troy and their
adventures splendidly filled the tapestries and chronicles of the Middle Ages. Hector becomes one of the Nine Worthies on a par with Julius Caesar and Charlemagne.

The question of whether an historical underpinning existed for the Wooden Horse was raised by Pausanias, a Latin traveller and geographer with a true historian’s curiosity, who wrote A Description of Greece in the second century A.D. He decided the Horse must have represented some kind of “war-machine” or siege-engine because, he argues, to take the legend at face value would be to impute “utter folly” to the Trojans. The question still provokes speculation in the twentieth century. If the siege-engine was a battering-ram, why did not the Greeks use it as such? If it was the kind of housing that brought assaulters up to the walls, surely it would have been even greater folly for the Trojans to take it in without breaking it open first. One can be lured this way down endless paths of the hypothetical. The fact is that although early Assyrian monuments depict such a device, there is no evidence that any kind of siege-engine was used in Greek warfare in Mycenaean or Homeric times. That anachronism would not have worried Pausanias, because it was normal in his, and indeed in much later, days to view the past dressed and equipped in the image of the present.

Ruse was indeed used in the siege of walled or fortified places in biblical lands in the warfare of the second millennium B.C. (2000-1000), which covers the century generally given for the Trojan War. If unable to penetrate by force, the attacking army would attempt to enter by cunning, using some trick to gain the confidence of the defenders, and it has been said by a military historian that “the very existence of legends concerning the conquest of cities by stratagem testifies to a core of truth.”

Although silent on the Wooden Horse, Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. wished to attribute more rational behaviour to the Trojans than Homer allowed them. On the basis of what priests of Egypt told him in the course of his investigation, he states that Helen was never in Troy at all during the war, but remained in Egypt, where she had landed with Paris when their ship was blown off course following her abduction from Sparta. The local king, disgusted by Paris’ ignoble seduction of a host’s wife, ordered him to depart; only a phantom Helen came with him to Troy. Had she been real, Herodotus argues, surely Priam and Hector would have delivered her up to the Greeks rather than suffer so many deaths and calamities. They could not have been “so infatuated” as to sustain all that woe for her sake or for the sake of Paris, who was anything but admired by his family.

There speaks reason. As the Father of History, Herodotus may have known that in the lives of his subjects, common sense is rarely a determinant. He argues further that the Trojans assured the Greek envoys that Helen was not in Troy but were not believed because the gods wished for the war and the destruction of Troy to show that great wrongs bring great punishment. Probing for the meaning of the legend, here perhaps he comes closer to it.

In the search for meaning we must not forget that the gods (or God, for that matter) are a concept of the human mind; they are the creatures of man, not vice versa. They are needed and invented to give meaning and purpose to the puzzle that is life on earth, to explain strange and irregular phenomena of nature, haphazard events and, above all, irrational human conduct. They exist to bear the burden of all things which cannot be comprehended except by supernatural intervention or design.

This is especially true of the Greek pantheon, whose members are daily and intimately entangled with human beings and are susceptible to all the emotions of mortals if not to
their limitations. What makes the gods so capricious and unprincipled is that in the Greek conception they are devoid of moral and ethical values — like a man lacking a shadow. Consequently, they have no compunction about maliciously deceiving mortals or causing them to violate oaths and commit other disloyal and disgraceful acts. Aphrodite’s magic caused Helen to elope with Paris, Athena tricked Hector into fighting Achilles. What is shameful or foolish in mortals is attributed by them to the influence of the gods. “To the gods I owe this woeful war,” laments Priam, forgetting that he could have removed the cause by sending Helen home at any time (presuming that she was there, as she very actively was in the Homeric cycle) or by yielding her when Menelaus and Odysseus came to demand her delivery.

The gods’ interference does not acquit man of folly; rather, it is man’s device for transferring the responsibility for folly. Homer understood this when he made Zeus complain in the opening section of the *Odyssey* how lamentable it was that men should blame the gods as the source of their troubles, “when it is through blindness of their own hearts” (or specifically their “greed and folly” in another translation) that sufferings “beyond that which is ordained” are brought upon them. This is a notable statement for, if the results are indeed worse than what fate had in store, it means that choice and free will were operating, not some implacable predestination. As an example, Zeus cites the case of Aegisthus, who stole Agamemnon’s wife and murdered the king on his homecoming, “though he knew the ruin this would entail since we ourselves sent Hermes to warn him neither to kill the man nor to make love to his wife, for Orestes when he grew up was bound to avenge his father and desire his patrimony.” In short, though Aegisthus well knew what evils would result from his conduct, he proceeded nevertheless, and paid the price.

“Infatuation,” as Herodotus suggested, is what robs man of reason. The ancients knew it and the Greeks had a goddess for it. Named Ate, she was the daughter — and significantly in some genealogies, the eldest daughter — of Zeus. Her mother was Eris, or Discord, goddess of Strife (who in some versions is another identity of Ate). The daughter is the goddess, separately or together, of Infatuation, Mischief, Delusion and Blind Folly, rendering her victims “incapable of rational choice” and blind to distinctions of morality and expedience.

Given her combined heritage, Ate had potent capacity for harm and was in fact the original cause, prior to the Judgment of Paris, of the Trojan War, the prime struggle of the ancient world. Drawn from the earliest versions — the *Iliad*, the *Theogony* of Hesiod, roughly contemporary with Homer and the major authority on Olympian genealogy, and the *Cypria* — the tale of Ate ascribes her initial act to spite at not being invited by Zeus to the wedding of Peleus and the sea-nymph Thetis, future parents of Achilles. Entering the banquet hall unbidden, she maliciously rolls down the table the Golden Apple of Discord inscribed “For the Fairest,” immediately setting off the rival claims of Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. As the husband of one and father of another of the quarrelling ladies, Zeus, not wishing to invite trouble for himself by deciding the issue, sends the three disputants to Mount Ida, where a handsome young shepherd, reportedly adroit in matters of love, can make the difficult judgment. This, of course, is Paris, whose rustic phase is owed to circumstances which need not concern us here and from whose choice flows the conflict so much greater than perhaps even Ate intended.

In other versions, the origins of the war are associated with the Flood legend which circulated throughout Asia Minor, probably emanating from the region of the Euphrates, which frequently overflowed. Determined to eliminate the unsatisfactory human species, or
alternatively, according to the Cypria, to “thin out” the population, which was overburdening the all-nurturing earth, Zeus decided upon “the great struggle of the Ilian war, that its load of death might empty the world.” He therefore contrived or took advantage of the goddesses’ quarrel over the Apple to bring the war about. Euripides adopts this version when he makes Helen say in the play named for her that Zeus arranged the war that “he might lighten mother earth of her myriad hosts of men.” Evidently, very early, there must have been a deep sense of human unworthiness to produce these legends.

Undeterred from mischief, Ate on another occasion devised a complicated piece of trickery by which the birth of Zeus’ son Heracles was delayed and an inferior child brought forth ahead of him, thus depriving Heracles of his birth-right. Furious at the trick (which does indeed seem capricious even for an immortal), Zeus flung Ate out of Olympus, henceforward to live on earth among mankind. On her account the earth is called the Meadow of Ate — not the Meadow of Aphrodite, or the Garden of Demeter, or the Throne of Athena or some other more pleasing title, but, as the ancients already sadly knew it to be, the realm of folly.

Greek myths take care of every contingency. According to a legend told in the Iliad, Zeus, repenting of what he had done, created four daughters called Litai, or Prayers for Pardon, who offer mortals the means of escape from their folly, but only if they respond. “Lame, wrinkled things with eyes cast down,” the Litai follow Ate, or passionate Folly (sometimes translated Ruin or Sin), as healers.

If a man Reveres the daughters of Zeus when they come near,
He is rewarded and his prayers are heard;
But if he spurns them and dismisses them
They make their way back to Zeus again and ask
That Folly dog that man till suffering
Has taken arrogance out of him.

Meanwhile, Ate came to live among men and lost no time in causing Achilles’ famous quarrel with Agamemnon and his ensuing anger, which became the mainspring of the Iliad and has always seemed so disproportionate. When at last the feud which has so damaged the Greek cause and prolonged the war is reconciled, Agamemnon blames Ate, or Delusion, for his original infatuation for the girl he took from Achilles.

Delusion, the elder daughter of Zeus; the accursed
Who deludes all and leads them astray ...
... took my wife away from me.
She has entangled others before me —

and, we might add, many since, the Litai notwithstanding. She appears once again in Mark Antony’s fearful vision when, gazing on the murdered corpse at his feet, he foresees how “Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge with Ate by his side, shall cry ‘Havoc’ and let slip the dogs of war.”

Anthropologists have subjected myth to infinite classification and some wilder theorizing. As the product of the psyche, it is said to be the means of bringing hidden fears and wish-fulfilments into the open or of reconciling us to the human condition or of revealing the contradictions and problems, social and personal, which people face in life. Myths are seen as “charters” or “rituals”, or serving any number of other functions. All or some of this may or may not be valid; what we can be sure of is that myths are prototypes of human behaviour and that one ritual they serve is that of the goat tied with a scarlet
thread and sent off into the wilderness to carry away the mistakes and the sins of mankind.

Legend partakes of myth and of something else, a historical connection, however faint and far away and all but forgotten. The Wooden Horse is not myth in the sense of Cronus swallowing his children or Zeus transforming himself into a swan or a shower of gold for purposes of adultery. It is legend with no supernatural elements except for Athena’s aid and the intrusion of the serpents, who were added, no doubt, to give the Trojans a reason for rejecting Laocoön’s advice (and who are almost too compelling, for they seem to leave the Trojans with little option but to choose the course that contains their doom).

Yet the feasible alternative — that of destroying the Horse — is always open. Capys the Elder advised it before Laocoön’s warning, and Cassandra afterward. Notwithstanding the frequent references in the epic to the fall of Troy being ordained, it was not fate but free choice which took the Horse within the walls. “Fate” as a character in legend represents the fulfilment of man’s expectations of himself.