

# On Courage. The Sense Of *θυμός*

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides an integrated analysis of *θυμός* (*thymós*). A psychosomatic concept, found in Greek epics and medicine, *θυμός* designates *courage* as a “vital force around the chest”. Later, its meaning has been specified in two fields: 1) *θυμός*, *thymós* (philosophy), the irascible soul (*θυμοειδές*, *thymocides*), parallel to the concupiscible soul and opposite to the rational one, according to Plato’s tripartition; 2) *θύμος*, *thymus* (anatomy), a cardiac gland of the vascular system. Today, the idea that *θυμός*, courage, and *θύμος*, cardiac gland, could have a common semantic root – *θύειν* (*thyein*) “to sacrifice by blowing and burning” – seems almost impossible. Our aim is to reconstitute the concept of *θυμός*, demonstrating how it has been reduced to a polarisation rational/irrational, and marginalised. We will examine the notion of *θυμός* in Greek tradition and describe one of its widespread manifestations, tattooing, both as a painful solicitation of interiority and for how the tattooed pictures reflect the personality of their wearers.

## Introduction

The nature of *θυμός* (*thymós*) as a psychosomatic condition, a mix of venous and arterial fluids on the one hand and of temperaments on the other, has diverted current philosophy and social sciences from field studies focused on the effects of *θυμός* on behaviour and in personal decisions.

Nevertheless, thymic features remain present in the everyday experiences of digital culture, influencing how people perceive their own body and the external world, the formation of tastes and distastes, and the transformation of senses into values. This is why, for instance, codified emojis include a number of thymic “symptoms”, that is psychosomatic significant, for the icons of determination and fear, joy and sadness, attraction and revulsion, bitterness and sweetness, anxiety and quietness, anger, fury, rage..., i.e. for passions born from one’s temperament and exaggerated or moderated by habits

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and social judgments. Even the common and systematic (“semi-symbolic”) correlation between these contrastive pathemic couples and the corresponding contrastive colours – joy is yellow inasmuch as sadness is blue, attraction and rage are red inasmuch as revulsion is green... – highlights the relevance of *somatic and inner sensorial dynamics* not only within the expression of passions, but also within relationships.<sup>1</sup> Our thermal sensations and physical reactions to the environment – the warmth of the sun and its yellow colour are perceived as positive, whereas the grey sky, mud and the humidity of rain are perceived as negative; the blushing and flushing of the skin (i.e. its turning red) can be a symptom of awkwardness or anger; a certain tonality of green evokes the sensation of disgust of regurgitating a bitter, greenish-yellow fluid... – all these associations should be acknowledged as constituents of passions and of individual and collective reactions.

### 1. Theme and Goals

This paper aims to reconceive the incidence of θυμός in public and personal lives, as the sphere of passions «related to the physical structure of the human organism» (Greimas, Fontanille, 1991, Engl. transl., p. 13). We care about what we mean today when we use and observe the use of collective and individual thymic passions in verbal and visual languages. Ancient philosophers discussed the category of θυμός considering its capacity to integrate physiological and psychological factors, and in Greek literature θυμός was an entity of primary importance: it was *the seat of character*, in association with the νόος (*nóos*, mind) the ψυχή (*psyché*, spirit) and the φρήν (*phrḗn*, diaphragm). Simultaneous but not synonymous with physical and meteorological conditions, θυμός constituted the breath of life (Frère, 2006).

Today: I] medical science has a better understanding of the function of this part of the body, building upon the observations of Hippocrates and Galen, but later the anatomical part was designated by *thymus*, from θύμος (“wartlike excrescence”). Modern medicine (Gray 1918; Standring et al., eds., 2008) separates the anatomical structure of this gland – the θύμος – from considerations about any emotional order/disorder. II] Psychologists, for their

<sup>1</sup> In the American 3D computer-animated film *Inside Out* (2015, Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures), the mind’s headquarters of the young Riley Andersen are inhabited by the five personifications of her basic emotions: Joy is yellow, Sadness is blue, Fear is violet, Disgust is green and Anger is red.

part, admit that some pathologies are induced by “thymic factors” – by the θυμός – and that well-being or happiness depends on what they call “thymic state”, i.e. on a person’s moods, mood-related emotions, and disposition to experience them, but they, too, dissociate the psychological and the physical levels and suspend judgement on their relationship. In addition,

psychoanalysis was never willing to turn as much detail and basic interest to dealing with the thymotics of the human being of either sex. It did not sufficiently investigate human pride, courage, stout-heartedness, craving for recognition, drive for justice, sense of dignity and honor, indignation, military and vengeful energies. (Sloterdijk, 2006, Engl. transl, p. 13-14)

After Plato, as we shall see, the concept of θυμός was gradually marginalised and inscribed in a polarisation between rational and irrational. Also courage becomes an «irrational audacity», τόλμα αλόγιστος, *tolma alogistos* (Thucydides, Περὶ τοῦ Πελοποννησίου πολέμου, *Perí tou Peloponnesíou polémou*, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, III, 82, 4), and remains during the modernity a «paradoxal virtue» (Fusaro, 2012), on the edge between passion and reason. Centuries later, Freud felt entitled to substitute the thymic drive with the erotic one, giving priority to the dynamics of desire, libido, lack, possession and consumption (*ibidem*).

In the essentially dualistic constitution of the “psychic apparatus” established by Freud, where «the *ego* represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the *id*, which contains the passions» (Freud, 1923, Engl. transl., p. 15), emotions and affects have an episodic and evanescent nature. Freud elaborates on Darwin’s theory of emotions, but remains anchored in the rigid topology of his own scheme: emotions are merely intermediaries between the *id* and the *ego*.

Affects and feelings correspond to processes of discharge, the final manifestations of which are perceived as [inner] sensations [...]. Repression results not only in withholding things from consciousness, but also in preventing the development of affect and the setting-off of muscular activity. (Freud, 1963, p. 121)

The Freudian model of drives reduces emotions to the polarity of the *id* and *ego*, and its psychoanalytical technique fails to provide a cognitive perspective on emotionality. The description of affects in a dynamic sense is only a halo around the reflection on anxiety, one of the few affects addressed by Freud due to its obvious psychopathological implications.

In doing so, «psychoanalysis must have been mistaken in an important respect about the nature of its objects» (Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, p. 13). Thus,

one must return to the basic conception of philosophical psychology found in the Greeks, according to which the soul does not only rely on eros and its intentions. Rather, the soul should open itself equally to the impulse of θυμός. While eroticism points to ways leading to those “objects” that we lack and whose presence or possession makes us feel complete, thymotics discloses ways for human beings to redeem what they possess, to learn what they are able to do, and to see what they want. (*Ibidem*, pp. 15-16)

By rethinking θυμός, we do not mean to dismiss the erotic model of the psychoanalytical doctrine – the narcissistic thesis that hating and loving are human forms of self-affirmation – but to pay equal attention to the wealth of thymic energies, as θυμός «signifies the center of the proud self» (*ibidem*, p. 12). Like the half-psychoic and half-somatic principle of an *inner command* – the call to action coming from within – θυμός is not the expression of an impulse, but a *motivation* (Caswell, 1990, p. 48).

Let us summarise the issues concerning the use of θυμός and rediscover and update its mixed agency. Even today, physiological explanations should be considered not as something that causes emotional processes and conducts, but as «alternative descriptions», alternative linguistic registers of the same phenomenon: «Anger, for example, is at once a desire for reprisal and a boiling of the blood» (Aristotle, *On the soul*, I, 1). Different descriptions of θυμός should be cross-examined. Let us start from ancient medicine, which ascribed it a double nature: physical and psychical. Far too often, this double nature is taken for granted. The second paragraph proposes a historical survey of the notion of θυμός in Greek tradition; in the third, we will try to explain why θυμός is supposed to be a basic emotion, and its semantic and linguistic place in Western cultures; in the fourth, we will describe one of its widespread manifestations: tattooing, and its capacity to bring out personality traits

(Marrone, Migliore, eds., 2018). Our case study does not address the implications of θυμός in the forms of political engagement, indignation, dissent and resistance to injustice (Purviance, 2008), but the narratives through which this «thoracic homeland» (*ibidem*) arises figuratively, although unnoticed, in tattoos. Rather than looking at θυμός as an automatic movement or a mysterious and ineffable origin of erratic behaviours, we are interested in identifying how thymic signs in enunciation processes turn a *person* in the effects of her/his *personality*.

## 2. The Historical Background Of θυμός

In Greek thought, up to the time of Hippocratic writings (460–370 b.C.), the cognitive activity was linked to the body and was located around the chest – θυμός (*thymós*), φρέν (*phrén*, diaphragm), κῆρ (*kêr*, heart) – which was also the center of emotions (Onians, 1951). If, for Plato, thought was a silent monologue of the rational soul, in Homer, θυμός was the seat of reflection (Concato, 1990, p. 114).

Physiology and pathology were based on the belief that the human body consisted of solid and fluid components, connected by various forms of interaction (Onians, *op. cit.*). Everything that had to do with the “psychical” dimension operated through the vital forces of the body (Vegetti, 1998). There was no inner hegemonic principle, no coherent “I” responsible for the unity and self-control of the psychical field. At least until Plato, there was no autonomous “soul”, and certainly no such notions as “conscience”, “unconscious” and “subconscious”. A person was the meeting point of affects and energies. This does not mean that passions could not be identified, articulated and described, but that they emerged by virtue of two inseparable aspects, physical and pathemic, of the same phenomenon. «The organ from which these upsurges take their departure is θυμός» (Sloterdijk, 2006, Engl. transl., p. 11).

### 2.1. Ancient Medicine

According to Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicine, human moods and emotions originate from an excess or lack of bodily fluids called “humours”. Greek physician Hippocrates classified these internal secretions into blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm, and defined their relationship to human behaviours and their possible combinations (Arikha, 2007).

Temperament theory, from Latin *temperare*, “to mix”, is rooted in this idea and was developed by Galen (AD 129 – c. 200) in his treatise Περὶ κρᾶσεων (*Peri kraseon, Of temperaments*). Galen associated temperaments to the four elements: hot (fire), cold (earth), dry (air) and wet (water). This led to the following combinations: hot/wet = blood; hot/dry = yellow bile; cold/dry = black bile; cold/wet = phlegm. Galen’s temperamental categories “sanguine”, “choleric”, “melancholic”, and “phlegmatic” were the result of an excess of one of these bodily humours, which caused or indicated an illness. His physiological approach treated passions and behaviours as the result of physiological dispositions. Galen used to claim that passions are differently located, not in the sense of the relation between a tenant and her/his apartment, but between the organ and its function (Galen, *That the Faculties of the Soul Are Consequent upon the Temperament of the Body*, in Galen, 1978). As we shall see, a recurring idea in these physiological descriptions, from Plato to the Stoics to Galen, is the thermodynamics of passions: heat is associated to ardour, cold to fear.

At the time of Galen, the θύμος (*thymos*) was already recognised as a cardiac gland that regulated these flows of energy in the body. Galen referred the term θύμος to warty excrescences or outgrowths that may be seen throughout the body, insisting on the resemblance with the outgrowths of the “θύμον” (*thymon*, thyme), the aromatic plant. However, he saw also analogies between “θύμος”, the gland, and “θύμον”, the plant, on the basis of the great medicinal properties ascribed to the thyme. Up to Galen, the cardiac gland of θύμος in medicine, like the inner motivation θυμός in literature and philosophy, was a kind of «breath related to blood» (Onians, *op. cit.*, p. 48), a boiling-up process associated with the blood flow, that expressed the idea of an «emotional spirit», of the power to act in an energetic and strong way (Sarri, 1997). Particularly, in his commentary on the *Iliad*, where Achilles strikes Polydorus with his spear, Galen wrote that «the thymus was a gland located between the two collar bones for the protection of the trachea from injury» (Joannes Galenus, *Scholia in Iliadem*, 20.406 a.1–6).<sup>2</sup>

A common semantic root could unit these different terms: the Indo-European \**dheu*, meaning “vapor, fumes” and forming the basis for a large

<sup>2</sup> Flach, H. (1876). *Glossen und Scholien zur hesiodischen Theogonie. Allegoriae in Homeri Iliadem*, 4.1–4. Leipzig: Teubner. Mentioned in Laios, 2018, p. 286.

number of words: the Latin *fumus* (“smoke”), the Sanskrit *dhūmah* (“vapour”, “smoke”), the Old Slavonic *dymǔ* (“smoke”) and *duchǔ*, (“breath”, “spirit”). Laios (2018), without mentioning Plato,<sup>3</sup> especially refers to the verb θύειν (*thyein*) – “to sacrifice meat and drink to gods, by blowing and burning” – which could have been shifted to the metonymical meaning of θύμον, because the thyme was burned and its fume odorised, and to the metaphorical meanings of θυμός – mental effervescence, anger, passion – and θύμος – the breath and the blood of the cardiac region.

Θυμός’ earliest anatomical description is found in Rufus of Ephesus (*Περὶ ὀνομασίας τῶν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μορίων*, *Peri onomasias ton tou anthropou morion*, *On the Names of the Parts of the Human Body, or briefly Onomastikon*, 168.1–169.1, 1st–2nd c. AD), who described the θυμός as a gland located over the heart, before the seventh thoracic spondyl and before the end of the bronchus that reaches the lung. Galen (*Περὶ τροφῶν δυνάμεως*, *Peri trophon dunameos*, *On the properties of food*, books III, 6.674.3–9, in Galen, 1978) was the first to note that the size of this organ changes throughout a person’s life and that its activity decreases sharply with time.

Today, we know that θυμός (thymus) is anatomically located in the anterior superior mediastinum, in front of the heart and behind the sternum, and that it is a specialised primary lymphoid organ of the vascular system: it comprises a large network of lymphatic vessels that carry a clear fluid, called “lymph”, towards the heart. As Galen had surmised, the θυμός is largest and most active during the neonatal and pre-adolescent periods, then begins to atrophy, even though residual lymphopoiesis continues throughout adult life.

## 2.2. Greek Literature

Early Greek literature and especially the Homeric corpus provide a wealth of data about θυμός, due to the genre’s quite unique externalisation of inner experience and to a terminology that reflects no abstraction but a lively interest in detail. Epic poetry, tragedy and epigrams contain almost clinical records of passions (Vegetti, 1985, p. 54, our transl.): Homer refers to θυμός more than 700 times, Hesiod 60 times, and the lyric poets 99 (Sullivan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See here, § 2.3.1., *Plato. The Invention Of The Soul*.

### 2.2.1. Homer And Hesiod

The use of the term is not explained in the *Iliad* or in the *Odyssey*. Caroline Caswell offers a summary of previous works on θυμός and a detailed reading of several passages (Caswell, 1990), from which we can draw the following notations. θυμός occurs in association with the concepts of φρήν (*phrēn*, diaphragm), κραδίη-καρδία (*kradie-kardía*, heart), νόος (*nóos*, mind) and ψυχή (*psyché*, spirit) and with a number of perceptive and cognitive verbs such as οἶδα (*oída*, to see, to know how to), γινώσκω (*gignosco*, to know), φρονέω (*fronéo*, to think), νοέω (*noéo*, to understand) and φράζω (*frazo*, to explain). However, in Homer and in Hesiod, it refers both to a specific portion of the person affected – for instance, anger comes to Zeus in his θυμός and Prometheus stings (δάκνω, *dakno*) Zeus in his θυμός (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 554 and 567) – and to an active participant: a person or god(dess) acts non only *in* but also *with* her/his θυμός. It is «an intermediate force between mortal beings and the unseen divine implication in human reality» (Concato, 1990, p. 115, our transl.). Human beings are the place where events converge; they are the narrators, because, as welcoming receptacles, even if they do not know why things happen, they perfectly know how. In θυμός, we hear the voice of that dialogue with the gods that the soothsayer perceives, catching their invisible plans (*Il.* VII, 44–45); it is in her θυμός that Helen receives the divine inspiration for her prophecy (*Od.* XV, 172); from there comes the poetic inspiration that allows events to be told (*Od.* VIII, 45). «Inspiration and presentment characterise the emotional quality of thymic knowledge attested in a recurring formula: “Ἐῶ γὰρ ἐγὼ τόδε οἶδα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν” (*Il.* VI, 447), “I know it through φρήν and θυμός”» (Concato, *op. cit.*, p. 116, our transl.). This “truth”, later unacceptable for Plato, is the warp on which all the events of the *épos* weave, coordinated by necessity and destiny, but escaping any visible order and logic, except the one that bets on the individual’s physiological “sincerity”.

As a topological organ, θυμός must be contained within the φρέν (*phrēn*, diaphragm) or within the στήθος (*stétos*, breast). It is diffused, like the emotions of which it is the seat, whereas the φρέν is “close-knit”. Just as water must be warmed within a kind of vessel, θυμός is warmed inside the φρέν, as a “process of inhalation, ebb and flow, liquefying and coagulation” (Clarke 1999, p. 107). Contained θυμός indicates controlled emotion, uncontained θυμός indicates extreme behaviour. Thus, through the concept of θυμός, the intellect



too functions (and fails) in physical terms. θυμός increases and decreases depending on physical conditions and is affected by food and drink; it permanently leaves the body after death, but its temporary absence determines a syncope and its return a revival.

As an active participant, θυμός is an independent agent within a person. It acts in the perception of the θυμός of another person, on a sophisticated level, and seems capable of greater opposition to the self (Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 152). Inner debate has its main *locus* in the θυμός:

...grieving, he spoke to his great-hearted θυμός [πρὸς ὄν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν] “O woe is me, what am I to endure? It would be a great act of cowardice if I should take flight, terrified by the numbers of men; but it will be worse if I am taken alone; the son of Kronos put the other Danaans to flight. But why has my dear *thymos* [θυμός] discussed these things in me? I know that cowards leave the battle, but he who excels in battle must stand his ground strongly, whether he is hit or hits another”. (*Il. XI*, 401-411)

These soliloquies depict the existence of separate “little people” within the individual, thing that is natural in the light of the Homeric psychology and of physiology in general (Adkins 1970, p. 18). They are almost all directed at the resolution of some moral or intellectual problem, presented as a choice between alternative courses of action. Overall, in epic poetry, θυμός designates the experience of a person who feels either emotionally or intellectually troubled. The emotions revealed in all of these speeches are self-directed in the sense that in them the speaker confronts problem that trouble him. θυμός is the place where psychical events are perceived, sometimes intended as the place and time of manifestation, other times as the matrix of affections: anger, grief, fear, pity, delight, violence, anxiety, hope, desire, hunger, thirst, anguish, and joy. Achilles is frequently accused of having an unyielding θυμός, even more unyielding than the θυμός of gods (*Il. IX*, 496-498: «But Achilles, master your great θυμός»). He is compared to a lion who yields to his θυμός. The apparent synonymy of θυμός, νόος (*nóos*, mind) and φρήν (*phrḗn*, diaphragm) actually refers to an indissoluble connection between thinking and feeling, «an admixture in the intellectual function of feeling» (Caswell, *op. cit.*, p. 50). In Homer, «thought tend to be worried thought, angry thought, and so on, charged

with emotions. [...] The dividing lines between various types of mental activity in Homer are blurred» (Harrison, 1960, p. 71).

### 2.2.2. Lyrical Poets And Classical Tragedians

In the lyric poets, individuals and their θυμός emerge as distinct entities, albeit bound by a close and multi-faceted relationship (Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 155). Pindar wonders where his θυμός is taking him (*ibidem*, p. 154) and uses vivid images: θυμός is an archer aiming his bow, a pilot sailing a ship, a fruit- or flower-gatherer or someone leading a person by the hand. It is less assumed to be a “sincere” organ – as a vehicle of perception and a motivating force – than «an organ designed to provoke suspicion and disbelief» (Pelliccia 1995, p. 342). Its compounds can express a state of joyous serenity, εὐθυμία (*euthymia*), of mental alertness, προθυμία (*prothymia*), of depression, of tendency to be despondent, δυσθυμία (*dysthymia*) or the act of being enraged, θυμοῦσθαι (*thymousthai*). θυμός is often addressed in the vocative: Archilocus, for example, advises it to adapt its reaction to joy and grief according to the ῥυθμός (*rhythmós, rhythm*) of human beings (*ibidem*, p. 152).

Classical tragedies reinforce these aspects. In Sophocles, θυμός conveys disquiet as much as pride; Aeschylus, talks of «the possibility of distinguishing, through θυμός, the “I” and the “you”, that is the “me” of everyone» (Frère, 2006, p. 55, our transl.). Thus, most studies on ancient Greek literature share the same dilemma: the search for a unified concept of either body or soul is frustrated repeatedly by a composite personality.

### 2.2.3. Heroic Subjectivities

θυμός is the camp of epics, and is related to «the first word at the beginning of the first sentence of the European tradition, in the first verse of the *Iliad*: the word μῆνις (*mênis*), “rage”. It appears fatally and solemnly, like a plea that does not allow for any disagreement [...]. In Europe literally everything began with rage» (Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, p. 7). Let us consider these opening lines: «Of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus, sing Goddess / that murderous rage which condemned / Achaeans to countless agonies and threw / many warrior souls deep into Hades» (Il. I, 1). The first and still uncertain perception of the self as a subject of action takes place in the fire of anger, in the reaction to the threat that comes from the other. In the condition of θυμός lie the roots and earliest signs of heroic subjectivity: «I feel the lust [θυμός] of battle burn more fiercely

within me, while my hands and my feet under me are more eager for the fray» (II. XIII, 73-75).

As mentioned by Vegetti (1995, p. 41), since archaic society lacked a State, a legislation and a shared moral order that could replace the lord's authority and sword, any offense suffered or even feared and any threat to heroic dignity triggered a reaction of indignation, anger and rage that led up to revenge, which reinstated the lord's rights.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the first self-configuration of a subject takes place in the space between the offense and the revenge: what would be later known as "passion" was then called "heroism", and knew no alternatives. This self-configuration is characterised by the release of violent energy – the sudden and destructive bite of the lion, a metaphor often applied to the Homeric hero. The use of anger to protect oneself from the threat of enslavement, and the use of revenge as a means to find freedom, were the right/duty of the lord and constituted the anthropological background of his subjectivity.

This is why heroism, in the Antiquity, was not merely an attitude, but «the most vital of all possible responses to the facts of life» (Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, p. 4): θυμός as the courage of acting out passions. A world without heroes would have been worthless, because human beings would have been exposed and vulnerable to the arbitrary attacks of nature. The hero, however, was living proof that acts and deeds were to be done by himself. Early heroes were celebrated as accomplishers of deeds and acts.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3. The Decline of θυμός

In the reflections of philosophers and with the elaboration of the ψυχή, the thymic dimension was no longer the emotional engine of great individual actions,

<sup>4</sup> Paolo Fabbri's detailed and fruitful semantic articulation of anger helps us understand the different reactions of the Homeric hero. Anger, as opposed to wrath, seems to imply resentment and an evaluation of its possible consequences. Anger possesses a quality of indignation that is not present in wrath. Anger looks more like rage, while wrath is closer to fury. Anger is under the cold control of the *ego*, while wrath is guided by the overwhelming passion of the *id*. One uses the rhetoric of the apostrophe and enhances the order of speech and gesture, the other expresses itself through inarticulate cries or silence. See Fabbri, 2011. On the passion of wrath, see Bodei, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> To demonstrate that anger, rage and revenge are the effects of the hero's vulnerability and tragic awareness, Concato mentions the last lines of the *Iliad*, with the pity in the θυμός of Achilles for Priam, that breaks the inexorable course of necessity. Achilles feels compassion for Priam because they share the same pain. Thus, θυμός is conducive of empathy, an intimate correspondence of thought and silent communication by affinity. See Concato, 1990.

but an obstacle to reason (according to Heraclitus<sup>6</sup> and Democritus) or merely an adjuvant of reason (according to Parmenides). In Democritus, fighting one's θυμός means moderating it to achieve εὐθυμία (*euthymia*), conquering and defeating an enemy to turn him into a friend.

### 2.3.1. Plato. The Invention Of The Soul

The idea of θυμός radically changed in the early Platonic dialogues. Plato compares passions to a storm (*Phaedo* 84, a-b), and connects θυμός with the verb θύειν, *thyein*, “to sacrifice by blowing and burning”, that he links to the movement of winds: «the violence of the winds on the cosmic level and the forceful inner movement of the θυμός on the individual level» (Caswell, *op. cit.*, p. 51). When not properly contained, θυμός can become a destructive force and blow an individual off course, just like the wind can do with a ship. Just like ψυχή (*psyché*), spirit, comes from ψύχω (*psycho*), “to breathe”, θυμός, inner wind, bearer of energy, comes from θύειν, to blow and to burn (*ibidem*).

In the wake of Orphic-Pythagorean puritanism, during Pythagoreanism (Timaeus, Philolaus), passions became factors of psychic contamination. Plato «“invents” a nucleus of subjective unification, the *soul*, a spiritual entity of divine origin which immediately shows a polar opposition with corporeality, and where feet and arms, as well as the θυμός, are dismissed» (Vegetti, 1995, p. 47, our transl.). There is a unified control center, the soul, later metamorphosed into “reason” without losing its essential characteristics (including its affinities with the divine). Passions – violent desires, pleasure, pain – converge into its polar opposite, i.e. the body, with which the soul must share the time of individual existence and which infects the soul with its impurity. The purification of the soul consists in «separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself and collect itself out of every part of the body» (*Phaedo* 67 cd). Such a radical separation between rational and irrational, pure and impure, are quite alien to Homeric psychology.

In the *Cratylus* (419d–e), Plato ascribes to Socrates a new meaning of επιθυμία, the «desire that goes against the soul» («ἐπί τον θυμόν », *epi ton thymon*), while in the *Phaedrus* he proposes a tripartite theory of soul, based on

<sup>6</sup> Several scholars have attempted to interpret the fragment B 85 DK of Heraclitus – «It is difficult to fight θυμός, for what it wishes it buys at the expense of ψυχή». See Darcus, 1977; Mansfeld, 1992; Zaborowski, 2003; Viano, 2013. All have emphasised θυμός as a dynamic power that goes beyond the pathos of anger and activates determination and affections.

the chariot allegory: the λογιστικόν (*logistikon*, rational), the θυμοειδές (*thymoeides*, spirited, irascible) and the ἐπιθυμητικόν (*epithymetikon*, appetitive, concupiscible). He thus adopts a substantial position on the nature and constitution of the human soul in its embodied state. Το θυμός, the “nerve” of the soul, he adds ἔρος (eros), an «innate energy» (*Phaedrus*, 246a; 251 a-c). Both are considered dangerous forces, because they can divert the soul from a good and just life. However, without such passionate horses that are subjugated to the soul, the chariot does not have the strength to move.

In the *Timaeus*, the psychical dimension becomes an autonomous system, endowed with its own physiological and pathological dynamics, often in conflict with one other. It is a tri-functional structure with the following “motivational centres”: the mind (seat of the rational soul), the cardiac region (seat of the θυμός, the emotional-aggressive soul), and the visceral and sexual areas (seat of desire, of ἔρος, the concupiscible soul). Plato was the first to define passions as «diseases of the soul» (*Timaeus* 86B1–87B9). As underlined by Vegetti, the medical knowledge of the 5<sup>th</sup> century b. C. provided Plato with models to think about the nexus between passions and their subject (Vegetti, 1998, pp. 10-11). Plato’s etiological approach ascribes the excess of choleric reactions to the boiling of blood in the cardiac region, and the erotic drive to the excess of seminal secretions in sexual organs. Organic malfunctions can sometimes be worsened by abnormal psychic behaviours, in which case a “therapy” of the soul is required to guarantee the health of the entire psychosomatic complex (*ibidem*). Passions, just like physical illness, are failures caused by an intrinsic weakness or by external pressures that force the soul to surrender to the “other” (Vegetti, 1995, p. 47). θυμός becomes here the silent guardian (without *logos*) which dominates the “wild beast” of visceral passions, on behalf of the rational soul entrenched in the mind’s citadel (*Timaeus* 69).

Plato’s theory of the soul mirrors his political theory of the new πόλις (*polis*, city) based on the principle of fair distribution (*Republic*): the soul has a rational “centre” that governs the individual’s behaviour, the spirited one, the θυμός, that governs the dynamics of self-affirmation, and the appetitive one governs the drives closest to the body: the desires for food, sex, wealth, and power. These three centers are respectively represented by a man, a wolf or to a lesser extent a lion, and a multifarious beast, according to the famous image of book IX of the *Republic*. And as Hendrick Lorenz’s seminal study on «the arguments for tripartition» highlights, «all three parts of the soul form not just blind, undirected cravings, but fully formed motivating conditions, three

important kinds of thing that people focus their attention and desires on and that they structure their minds and lives around: *wealth, honour* (or *esteem*) and *wisdom*» (Lorenz 2006, p. 18), that is having bodily desires, being angry and learning. They correspond to three people's psychological tendencies and characters, naturally finding themselves leading three kinds of life: the life of business or money-making, the life of political or military excellence and prominence and the life dedicated to learning and the achievement of wisdom. But next to honour and esteem, courage plays a major role in the life of political or military excellence, if «the part of the mortal soul that exhibits courage and spirit, the ambitious part, they settled nearer the head, between the midriff and the neck, so that it might listen to reason and together with it hold down by force the part consisting of appetites» (*Timaeus* 70 A 2-6). In particular, “it is because of spirit that we call a person courageous, namely, when it preserves through pains and pleasures the declarations of reason about what is to be feared and what is not” (*Republic* 4, 442 B 10-C 2).

In the *Timaeus*, and even more so in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, θυμός is no longer opposed to λόγος (logos), but serves as its natural auxiliary in fighting against immoderate desires. Indeed, when moderated, θυμός underpins the virtue of courage needed by the guardians of the ideal city. It eagerly fights<sup>7</sup> for the right order in the right city (*Republic* 440d, 441a). On the contrary, when the soul's uncontrolled appetitive part puts his particularly strong spirited and rational parts at the service of the satisfaction of its desires, ferocity and unrestrained thirst for power emerges, i.e. the tyrannical nature, which is an offspring of democracy and the most conflicted and unhappy of all souls. «Plato's response to the phantasy that only the tyrant, like Zeus, is free, is that under the tyranny of eros conjoined with appetites, nobody is free» (Arruzza 2018, p. 183).

### 2.3.2. Aristotle On θυμός

Aristotle also appreciates the virtue of moderation *versus* the excess of anger, but its system of thought does not present the same etiological and therapeutic

<sup>7</sup> In the fighting technique of the hoplite phalanx, θυμός is the first requisite to save one's life in the compactness of the front, which no one should abandon, neither out of heroic furour nor out of cowardice. Thucydides ascribes the Athenians' devastating choice of sending a great naval expedition against Syracuse to an uncontrollable collective desire (επιθυμία, *epithymia*). See Thucydides, Περὶ τοῦ Πελοποννησίου πολέμου, *Peri tou Peloponnesiou poleμου*, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, VI, 24.

circularity found in Plato within the functions of the soul. Because Aristotle takes desires to be hylomorphic composites that are constituted by, on realized in, changes of some sort or other. So he accepts that desires are realized in bodily changes, but the changes that realize them occur in and belong to the ensouled body, not “the soul”. In fact something that itself undergoes change could not be a principle of changes. Whatever is done or undergone in psychological conflicts is done or undergone by the person in question, or perhaps by the relevant parts of his or her organism. Having said that, «we do not try to understand the configuration in terms of the *material* constituents and their properties, but rather in terms of the form or organization» (Frede, 1995, p. 101). The soul being «just the form or the nature of the living body, there is no need to introduce, in addition to the form or nature, a distinct soul, either to account for the life of an organism as a whole or for a mental part of it» (*ibidem*, p. 107). Therefore the change that realizes anger, which is a manifestation of spirited desire, is «boiling of the blood and the hot stuff around the heart» (*On the Soul* 1.1. 403<sup>a</sup>31 - <sup>b</sup>1)

Anger’s *material aspects* do not merely accompany anger, but are integral part of it. Its *bodily form* can originate from the overheating of blood in the cardiac region, from a desire for revenge motivated by an offense, or from errors occurred in one’s family and social educational history. Stoics later developed this position, and claimed that the configuration of the subject originates from a competition of strength between external pressure and the subject’s inner moral and intellectual energy.

Furthermore, in Platonic physiology the acropolis corresponded to the head (*Timaeus* 69 et seq.). The θυμός was located underneath, between the diaphragm and the neck, so that «it might be within hearing of the reason and might join it in forcibly keeping down the tribe of lusts, when they would in no wise consent to obey the order and word of command from the citadel» (*ibidem*, 70B). In Aristotle the acropolis, from a biological point of view, corresponds to the heart (*An. Parts* III, 7, 670). Remo Bodei (1991, Engl. transl., p. 174) emphasises Aristotle’s return to the centrality of θυμός, and to the emotional dimension. Aristotle asserts the merit of being both ἐνθύμιος (*enthymos*, strong of spirit)<sup>8</sup> and διανοητικός (*dianoétikos*, “intelligent”) (*Politics* 7, 1327b).

<sup>8</sup> Hence the rhetorical syllogism of the ἐνθύμημα (*enthumēma*, enthymeme), used in oratorical practice and theorised by Aristotle as the «the *body* of proof», that is «the strongest of rhetorical proofs» (*Rhetoric* I.1.3, 11). For a philosophical recognition on enthymeme in Greek rhetoric and

Spiritedness and intelligence work together, each with its own features, in political and civic action. For «the man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV, 5). Despite his distance from heroic fury, Aristotle «does not renounce the intersubjective reactivity that is expressed in anger and that separates the free man from the menacing shadow of slavery and subjection» (Vegetti, 1995, p. 43, our transl.)

### 2.3.3. The Role Of θυμός In The Nosographic Taxonomies Of The Stoics

The nosographic taxonomies developed by the Stoics confirm the idea that passions are «diseases of the soul» (*Timaeus* 86B1-87B9) and condemn θυμός to a marginal and negative role. Plato anticipated the matrix of these taxonomic tables in the *Laws*: the couple *pleasure/pain* is located at the intersection between body and soul, while the couple *desire/fear* (waiting for pleasure/pain) is located in the temporal dimension of the future. Starting from this matrix, the Stoics Zeno and Chrysippus developed a psychological interpretation of the passions that remained valid until the modern age, influencing Kant's anthropology and Freud's psychoanalysis.

In the Stoic taxonomy reported by Diogenes Laertius (*Lives Em. Phil.* VII, 111 ff.), and in Pseudo-Andronicus (*Fragm.* III, 391-397),<sup>9</sup> θυμός intended as a social form of passion is no longer distinct from θυμός as the sphere of an individual's physical desires (corresponding to Plato's επιθυμία, epithymia, or lower part of the soul). However, the whole emotional dimension becomes the expression of the irrational dimension, nothing but a disorder of the reason, and the deepest and strongest emotions become marginalised, if not despised.

Fear and pain, pleasure and desire are connected to the thermal gradients of the psychical πνεύμα (*pneúma*): cooling-contraction are associated to fear and pain, and heating-expansion to pleasure and desire. This πνεύμα, which replaces Plato and Aristotle's blood, is a psychophysical "vapour" with an uncertain epistemological status. Stoicism progressively credits it with extraordinary functions, which culminated in the "spirit" of Late Antiquity and

in Aristotle, see Piazza, 2000, 2012. Within the framework of semiotic studies, the centrality of θυμός in the argumentative structure of the enthymeme has been examined by Denis Bertrand. See Bertrand, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in Vegetti, 1995, pp. 54-56.



of Christian thought. The thermodynamics of passion are still found today, for instance in the psychosomatic metaphors for anger (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff, Kövecses, 1986) or pride (Kövecses, 1987). However, θυμός and all its related passions are yet to be treated as positive qualities.

### 3. Is θυμός a metaphor?

Some scholars describe Homer's and Plato's θυμός as a metaphor. Douglas Cairns, in particular, suggests that in Greek literature and philosophy θυμός is a metaphorical “part” of the person whose personification serves to figure particular forms of motivation:

As a kind of breath that you can think with, an entity within the chest that is a source of thoughts, emotions, and desires, the θυμός is already metaphorical. The basic ontological metaphor is regularly extended by personification, e.g. when θυμός is the subject of verbs of wishing and commanding, and personification can take the specific form of making the θυμός an apparent partner in dialogue. (Cairns, 2014)

A transfer of qualities from the reality of a person's existence – what the living creature does and exhibits: beliefs, emotions, and desires – to the construct of the soul is involved, according to Cairns. In the case of the tripartite soul, the *explanans* and the vehicle would be the model in which the three entities, λογιστικόν, θυμοειδές and ἐπιθυμητικόν do the work, while the *explanandum* and tenor would constitute the mental and spiritual life of the person (*ibidem*).

It seems to us that detecting shifts of metaphorical and literal content in Platon and in the use of Homeric Greek does not take in account the imbrications between physiology and psychology that are typical of that world. θυμός is not an “entity”, namely a physiological organ, metaphor of a psychic phenomenon, but a physically embodied psychic function. There is no separation between different domains here, and not because poets and philosophers are «free to present what seems to them most true, to see a god here, a θυμός there» (Pelliccia, 1995, p. 266). Greek conceptions of human motivations, implying psychology and physics as well, is responsible for that. Similarly, it sounds anachronistic to wonder whether θυμός «possesses full speech-powers» and to interpret the passage «why has my dear thymos [θυμός]»

(II. XI, 401-411, § 2.2.1.) as «a chief exhibit for Homeric ignorance of introspective consciousness, the *Geist* that in Homer man can only reflect to his θυμός; he cannot commune with himself but can only converse with an organ» (Snell, 1931, p. 82). Consciousness and unconscious are modern concepts and, as usual, using our theoretical instruments to read systems of thought and epochs that are far different fails to do justice to their complexity. First of all, θυμός is not just an organ but a psychosomatic function, as explained above; and secondly it influences human behavior, and it is this endeavor, rather than any specific conception of either as a speech-competent entity, that encourages the use, with θυμός as subject, of such verbs as διαλέγω (*dialegomai*, to dialogue), κελεύω (*keleuo*, to command, to order) and the rest.

#### 4. The Thymic Category in Structural Semantics and Linguistics

Structural semantics, considered by Algirdas J. Greimas (1966) as the deep dimension of social life, bases its “generative trajectory of meaning” on “euphoria/dysphoria”. According to Greimas, who follows up on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, sensible perceptions impregnate meanings and values (Greimas, 1966, Engl. transl: 74), so that a large part of the semantics of cultures can be explored through “exteroceptivity” (the sensory perception resulting from the world’s experience), “interoceptivity” (the abstract realm of the internal perception of a perceiving subject) and “proprioceptivity” (the body’s self-perception). Greimas mentions the adjectives “tired” and “exhausted” (“*fatigué*” and “*harassé*”) and their synonym “deflated” (“*dégonflé*”), where the dysphoric psychological feeling is strictly connected with the proprioceptive one (*ibidem*, p. 98). Language is full of such semic categories: the figures of the garret and cellar in Bachelard (1957) are abandoned in order to retain only the semes of “high” and “low”, useful in the construction of axiological sememes such as «euphoria of heights and dysphoria of depth» (*ibidem*: 157-158).

In light of his analysis of Maupassant’s story *Deux amis* (1883), known for its remarkable and extensive commentary on the «delicious joy» that «infests the two fishermen» (Greimas, 1976, Engl. transl., p. 148), Greimas introduces the “thymic category”: «how living beings within a given *milieu* and considered to be a “system of attractions and repulsions”, “perceive” their own bodies and react to their environment» (Greimas, 1979, p. 89, our transl.). The thymic category «can be equated with the term “animated” of the linguistic category animate/inanimate» (*ibidem*).

#### 4.1. Obstacles to Research and New Approaches

Unfortunately, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, does not reflect Greimas's theoretical achievements. The semiologist who wrote the entry for "thymic category", Sorin Alexandrescu, mentions that it originates from the word *thymia* – «mood, basic affective disposition» (Petit Robert) – and informs us that the term serves to articulate the semantics of human self-perception (Greimas, Courtés, eds, 1979, Engl. transl., entry "Thymic category"). Alexandrescu then proceeds to establish a hierarchy where the proprioceptive is superior to the thymic, which in turn implies the phoric, euphoric/dysphoric. Then, unexpectedly, he proposes to expunge the thymic category:

Should we then speak of an axiology so deep to be, even before the constitution of the subject in narrative semantics, the result of the drives or of the work of the collective unconscious? The concrete content of the term "thymic projection", the sense and the motivation of the euphoric-dysphoric movement towards the object recall the different primitive, somewhat obscure terms used in Brentano's axiology (love or hate of the object determine its value for the subject), from Scheler (it is the value, instead, that causes love for the object), from Ehrenfels (desire creates value), from Meinong (the value gives birth to desire). (*ibidem*)

Alexandrescu's suspicion that psychoanalytical drifts may reduce the complexity of the phenomenon led him to abandon the thymic category. He goes as far as admitting its inoperability, due the "confusion" that it generates: «the only solution is to substitute the term "thymic" with that of "axiological modes" and consider the modalisation of being as a form of evaluation» (*ibidem*).

In the Parisian seminars on passions, Greimas continued his investigation of the subject and examined, for instance, the semic nucleus of bitterness and rancour in anger, by way of their physiological and gustative characters, that is their bitter, rancid aftertaste (Greimas, 1981). Significantly, taking the opposite direction to psychoanalysis, semiotics chooses to proceed *outworld*, namely to describe how the deep semantics of passions acts in social life, *outside* (Fabbri, Sbisà, 1985; Fabbri, Pezzini, eds, 1987), instead of working on the introspection process, namely from inward out. This is why the key term in the semiotic analysis of the pathemic dimension is *passion* rather than *emotion*, since the latter is connoted as something that influences one's

mental activity, conscious thoughts, feelings and behaviours. *Emotion*, after all, comes from the Latin *emoveō*, “to move from inside”, while *passio* means “to suffer from an external factor”.

*Phoria* and *thymia* are key notions in *Semiotics of passions* (1991). The “thymic dimension” is presented by Greimas and Fontanille as «the third dimension of the surface narrative syntax» (*ibidem*, Engl. transl., p. 44), alongside the pragmatic and cognitive dimensions. However, here is the thymic sphere that stands on par with the pragmatic and cognitive dimensions; the relationship of “thymic” as a subcategory of “passions” is now reversed: “thymic”, as a complex category that joins passions and sensibilities, is the genus and passions are the species. Among the lexical entries for passion-related lexemes such as “sentiment”, “disposition”, “inclination”, “tendency” and “character”, Greimas and Fontanille include “temperament”, defined as the «stabilisation of a mixture» – a definition that allows us to understand affectivity through the Hippocratic system of humours. Greimas’s analysis of nostalgia is the turning point, because it is where Greimas realises the impact of thymic events and thymic performances on pathemic states (Greimas, 1986): thymic is the psychosomatic syncretism, in nostalgia, between the mental “trouble” caused by a loss and melancholy, languor and physical decay. Hence, Greimas postulates a narrative of the thymic dimension, autonomous and syntactically articulable, useful to describe how the inner life is externalised.

### 5. Tattoos. The Bright Core of Personality

Today, in Europe, one person out of ten wears a tattoo. In New Zealand and Canada, the ratio is one out of four. These are all so-called “first-world countries”: tattoos are no longer the prerogative of Samoans, gladiators, convicts or sailors, even though all tattoo wearers carry on the “brand” of the legendary epic hero. *θυμός* goes back to being a virtue within the epistemic “inversion of sign” of tattooing. A wound that counts as «the red badge of courage»<sup>10</sup>, not of shame.

In our hypothesis tattoos constitute an ideal case study of the thymic dimension, because they enact a rhetorical externalisation of interiority, a projection of the *idem* onto the *ipse* through the solicitation of the interiority. Tattoos stage and depict a paradigm of temperaments; they force the enunciation system to be reviewed afresh; and they portray and reveal the

<sup>10</sup> See Crane 1895.

personality of their wearer. We are not interested in providing an unambiguous or conclusive explanation of such a wide phenomenon, but rather in investigating its narrative and discursive functions through *θυμός*, i.e. through *the courage to enact passions*. Body marking is the direct translation, mediated by the skin, of cognitions and emotional conducts in relation to moods that are internal, but still elaborated and observed in the form of reactions to the environment.

Due to the increasing popularity of the phenomenon, a “psychology of tattoos” (Casadei, 1997) has recently emerged to read their wearer’s character through the markings on their skin. Again, the difference in approach between psychology or psychoanalysis and semiotics is clear: psychologists and psychoanalysts deal with the unconscious, bringing out what is hidden in the individual. Semiologists carry out “situated” surveys of human temperaments. By “situated” I mean empirical, i.e. expressed through discourse and pictures rather than in the internal (psychical) environment of the subject, where the complex and rich nature of the manifestation of *θυμός* is reduced to a handful of semantic primitives. Intimacy is never a reclusive interiority, when and for how it opens up to the other:

The movement of intimacy goes *towards the transpersonal*, attempts to meet the other, breaks the boundaries that set the *ego* in an exuberant sphere [...]. In the depths of myself I perceive a call *to* the other and from the other at the same time. Any intimate experience is an experience of meaning experience in a double sense, because it opens to a double perception of the things that concern us and belong to us. (Jullien, 2013, our transl.)

Rather than an obsessive concern for one’s own appearance, a form of body *dysmorphia* (Lemma, 2011), tattoo is a communicative strategy that is rich in enunciative forces that externalise intimacy.

### 5.1. How Tattooing Works

Wherever it is practiced, tattooing is always an external physical triggering of the internal sphere through a permanent figurative inscription (Marenko, 2002). It expresses an individual’s self – an *image* through an external *text* that

actualises it and turns it into a public *work*.<sup>11</sup> The operation takes place in three phases: I] puncturing of the skin, usually entrusted to a third party or adjuvant (“qualifying phase”: competence); II] staging, external exposure (“decisive phase”: performance); III] evaluation, in which the tattooed person presents these signs and gradually matches them with the perception of the “me” and with that of others, possibly leading to the modification or removal of the pictures (“glorifying phase”: sanction).<sup>12</sup> Any change made to a tattoo implies reversing the position between the “self” inscribed in the picture and the “me” of the wearer. The tattooed person feels changed, hence the need to refresh the tattoo.

The “exhibition” (phase II) can be clustered in a single sign or expanded and distributed on the body’s surface and volumes. The exposure of the self changes according to the areas, depending on whether it is exposed or hidden, isolated or connected with other parts of the body. Whatever the purpose of the tattoo – ornamental, “branding”, of social belonging, ritual... – the pigmentation of the skin by means of needles is always a puncture, a gesture that expresses an interior image that becomes real only through tattooing. This taste, socially exteriorised and personalised, must have been perceived as scandalous and unacceptable by a number of ideologies. Catholicism saw tattoos as the sign of the devil: in 787 AD, Pope Adrian I banned them, and numerous papal bulls to the same effect were issued in the following years.<sup>13</sup> Other cultures, instead, accept tattooing as a painful but normal and necessary practice that helps them grasp, intersubjectively, what animates living beings in relation to their environment. Tattooing aims to abolish social distances and to approach a

<sup>11</sup> On the discontinuity between text, work and image see Migliore, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Qualifying, decisive and glorifying are the three steps of the “canonical narrative scheme”. Greimas (1984) draws them from Propp’s morphology of one hundred Russian fairy tales, and formalises them as manipulation, competence, performance, and sanction. See Greimas, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> The Church sees Cain as the first “tattooed” person in history, because of *Genesis*, 4: 15: «Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me”. But the Lord said to him: “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him». Hence the first prohibitions in *Leviticus* – «Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord» (*Leviticus*, 19, 28); «They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh» (*Leviticus*, 21, 5). See also Lombroso’s association between tattoos and criminality. For a historical and social overview of tattoos, see Krakow, 1994; Kächelen, 2004; Rondinella, 1985; Caplan, 2000; Castellani, 2014. A semiotic assessment of the phenomenon can be found out in Marrone, Migliore, 2018.

personal area to watch. Which is why more detached societies, that limit the individual interiority to the soul's communication with God, through confession, tend to distrust tattoos.

### 5.1.1. Mixed Skin

The psychoanalytical concept of “skin-ego”, related to a self-referential, solipsistic individual (Anzieu, 1985), is inappropriate already to describe the skin as «an interface between soma and sema» (Fontanille, 2004), even less so to examine the practice of tattooing. A mixed skin, resulting from elements of different origins and nature, characterises tattoo. It is inherent to a body in the flesh, to an individual who it gives meanings and personality, but bears the traces of other people's actions, treatments, social repertoires, and styles: old-school, tribal, oriental, bio-mechanic, fantasy, floral.

Didier Anzieu defines the “skin-ego” as «a fantasmatic schema between the conscious, preconscious and unconscious fantasies that construct a bridge between psyche and soma, world and other psyches» (Anzieu, *op.cit.*, Engl. transl., p. 26). In the “skin-ego”, one starts from and returns to the *idem*. However, the myth of Marsyas, which Anzieu analyses to exemplify his hypothesis, proves something different. It shows in fact the opposite case of the myth of expropriation of another's skin. Anzieu supposes that the “me” develops there the original ghost of a non-narcissistic but masochistic «common skin», since that skin is flayed and wounded (*ibidem*, § 4). Thinking that Marsyas's skin is not the skin of the *ego*, but that of another person, which has been ripped out and made public, never crosses Anzieu's mind.

The myth of Marsyas tells the story of a god's dispossession and appropriation of the skin of a satyr: a semi-divine being with a half-animal, half-human body (Marsyas) dares to challenge Apollo to a musical contest, wins and is therefore punished and deprived of his skin. Apollo rips off Marsyas's skin to produce a new and promiscuous *self-skin*, which is exposed, as a warning, to a jury of third parties: the Muses and King Midas. Consistently with the structure of this myth, in Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*,<sup>14</sup> the self-skin can coincide with the “skin” of the painting (Thévoz 1984), and the artist identifies himself with Midas, the judge. In other pictorial expressions of the myth, such as Melchior

<sup>14</sup> Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, 1575, oil on canvas, 212 x 207 cm, Archdiocesan Museum Kroměříž.

Meier's *Apollo, Marsyas and the Judgment of Midas*,<sup>15</sup> Apollo brandishes the spoil as a trophy. Midas, who disapproves of the verdict and recognises the satyr's skin in those semblances, will in turn be punished with a pair of donkey ears. Later in history, in the typical shift of mythology, Marsyas relives in St. Bartholomew's remains, which, in Michelangelo's depiction, bear the "tattoo" of a self-portrait.<sup>16</sup>

The tattooed skin is a skin-ego that is destined to become autonomous, a "self-skin". In fact tattooed pictures personalise a single individual, but can be transposed with variations on another body. They resist exclusivity. So, on the one hand, creating a figure by inserting ink, dyes and pigments into the dermis layer of the skin is quite different from making it on a canvas: the permanence on the skin gives the idea of a "stasis" of one's interiority and seems to deny, at first, the possibility of a change. On the other hand, this special operation of "symbolization" of one's interiority clashes with the use of social and typical signs taken from tattoo catalogues and is faced with the non univocal interpretation of that symbol. Just by moving to another country, the reception of a tattoo changes profoundly. What a tattoo symbolizes for its wearer varies greatly in present day, but it can be inferred from the choice of the design and in relation with other details of his/her look.

### 5.1.2. Enunciation Processes: The "Me" And The "Self"

Various instances come into play to negotiate the tattooing process: the customer, his or her skin, the machine, the pictures, and the substances such as ink, dyes and pigments. There is never a single subject in tattooing: the whole practice, from the choice of the picture(s) to the operation itself, depends on a relationship of trust between tattooer and tattooee. Here the act of production – *débrayage*, in semiotic terms – is not performed by the wearer of the tattoo, but is delegated to a composite instance tattooer + needle, in charge of transforming the "material support" of the skin into a "formal support". Tattooing is the fruit of a "*con-sensus*", of a participated sense. Tattooee and

<sup>15</sup> Melchior Meier, *Apollo, Marsyas and the Judgment of Midas*, 1581, engraving, 22.9 x 31.3 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>16</sup> Michelangelo, St. Bartholomew, detail from *The Last Judgment*, 1535-1541, fresco, Rome, Sistine Chapel.



tattooer negotiate the styles, techniques and pictures, based on: I] the body part(s) to be tattooed; II] pain tolerance; III] previous tattoos.

The basic value – the priority of the personality over the person – determines the themes and figures. Tattooing forces the apparatus of enunciation – I (we), you, he (they) – (Benveniste, 2009) to integrate the proprioceptive positions of the “me” and the “self”, which impregnate it with thymic values. The “self” is the exteroceptive side of the “me”, that functions as a boundary, as a place of translation between interiority (“me”) and the tactile and thermal senses (“self”), between a stable identity (“me”) and its transformations throughout time (“self”). Tattooing means to permanently personalise the intimate, transforming the subject of doing and being – I/you/he – into a visible personality. It is not fortuitous that most prisoners feel the need to wear a tattoo, in order to claim what characterised them before incarceration, beyond and above their social status as a person, and to substitute their identification number with *simulacra* of the “me”.

### 5.1.3. An External Point Of View

It is always a spectator that attributes a personality to the tattooed person. As mentioned above, in tattooing personalisation occurs not from the inside out (i.e. from the *id*, *ego* and *superego* to the world), but from the outside in (i.e. from the world to the “me”/”self”). Solicitation of the interiority imposes a reversal of the point of view: the *ipse* becomes the fixed subject and the *idem* the changing object. The *ipse* provides a tenor to the *idem*, attests its existence throughout life. Therefore, it is essential to observe the point of view inscribed in the pictures.

In most cases the point of view is external, extroverted: the “me” of personality is exposed in the sense of who will look at it. Yet, sometimes tattoos can be read in two ways, one external and one internal: the “me” relies on the “self”. The “me” and the “self” are no longer just physical and semantic dislocations of the body, but instances that figuratively establish humoral states, desires for conjunction, projections and challenges. Thus, Leonard Shelby, the protagonist of Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* (2001) who suffers from short-term memory loss, covers his body with tattoos to externalise indications about his recent past and the imminent future. Here the two senses of reading, external and internal, alternate, as memory’s planes of consistency.

### 6. Branded On Skin. The Resurgence of *Thymos*

Tattoo's mixed skin expresses and emphasises personality traits. Tattooed people offer the possibility to exist not to the depicted image(s) or word(s), but to the point of *junction* between them and the skin. They and the tattooer choose how to show off these traits, either in isolation or in combination with the look (outfit, make-up, hairdo), on extended areas of the body, such as the back or the chest, or at the articulations: elbows, wrists, neck. Some tattoos are hidden, secret or camouflaged, and are meant to be uncovered only at the right moment. Tattoos are, according to Saussure's paradigm, distinctive signs: I] they grasp and make relevant old codes and symbolisms; II] they simulate a "terminative" identity, similar to the identity of heroes at the end of their undertakings, in fairy tales and in ancient Greek epics, and comparable to current branding and marketing strategies (Marrone, 2007).

The presentation of the "me" on the skin is, in plastic and figurative terms, a coalescence of heterogeneous factors: natural and artificial, primitive and civilised, organic and inorganic, individual and social, private and public. Thus, tattoos resemantise the idea of *θυμός*, conveying the properties of one's temperament through equivalent physiological, pathemic and environmental forms. Tattooed pictures reveal on the body the wearer's courage to mark her/his body and a distinctive personality, even if the contrast between how one wants to appear and how other sees her/his physical aspect may produce ironic effects. Tribal representations, of skulls, knives, swords, lions, tigers and panthers have a different temperament from wings, dolphins and snakes, which in turn differ from pierced hearts, roses, crosses, anchors, or butterflies, castles, tears, moons, stars. A structural, i.e. relational analysis of these pictures gives us an idea of the content and expression forms of choleric, phlegmatic, sanguine and melancholic temperaments. Also among the repertoires, Sailor Jerry's tattoos, that today are included in the old school style, present sanguine or choleric traits, while Pietro Sedda's ("the Saint Mariner")'s portrait tattoos, look melancholic.

An iconology of tattoos is an iconology of human *θυμός*. The practice of tattooing makes room for an externalisation of *θυμός* as an engine for rediscover its ancient properties and then for moderate and tempere forms of audacity, develop alliances with reason and also measure degrees and levels of empathy. A new language of the deep passions, of characters and personalities, a language as much silent as it is visual and rhetorical, inahibits our societies, defins relationships and establishes interpersonal climates.

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