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The myths of Mars: from its Greek origins to Dan Simmon's posthuman *Ilium-Olympos*

Os mitos de Marte: das suas origens gregas ao *Ilium-Olympos* pós-humano de Dan Simmons

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Abstract. Mars has always fascinated humanity due to its proximity, movement, and red color. For ancient civilizations, it symbolized blood and war, and for Greeks and Romans, it was considered the living place of Ares/Mars, the god of war. The discovery of straight lines on the planet's surface by 19th-century astronomers led to the popular belief that it could be inhabited by intelligent creatures. Since then, Mars has become a kind of mythic double onto which we have projected our Earthly hopes and fears. In the *Ilium-Olympos* series by Dan Simmons, set on a futuristic Mars, ancient and modern myths are revisited and recontextualized to explore our deepest desires as human beings. Its hero, Harman-Prometheus, represents those who still read the ancient epics convinced that their narratives and myths provide the wisdom to understand our profoundest desires.

Keywords: Myth. Mars. Odyssey. Simmons.

Resumo. Marte sempre fascinou a humanidade devido à sua proximidade, movimento e cor vermelha. Para as civilizações antigas, simbolizava sangue e guerra, e para os gregos e romanos, era considerado o local de morada de Ares/Marte, o deus da guerra. A descoberta de linhas retas na superfície do planeta por astrônomos do século XIX levou à crença popular de que ele poderia ser habitado por criaturas inteligentes. Desde então, Marte se tornou uma espécie de duplo mítico, no qual projetamos nossas esperanças e medos terrenos. Na série *Ilium-Olympos*, de Dan Simmons, ambientada em um Marte futurista, mitos antigos e modernos são revisitados e recontextualizados para explorar nossos desejos mais profundos como seres humanos. Seu herói, Harman-Prometeu, representa aqueles que ainda leem as antigas epopeias, convencidos de que suas narrativas e mitos oferecem a sabedoria para entender nossos desejos mais profundos.

Palavras-chave: Mito. Marte. Odisseia. Simmons.

1. Introduction

People on earth imagined the possibility of life on other planets from the moment they began to conceive of them as other worlds. It was once believed that gods lived on those remote places, beyond human reach and, through symbolic constellations, their

images shaped the reading of the cosmos. Our partial knowledge of our nature and the universe's push us to continue creating myths and projecting them onto the worlds we can only imagine from afar. Our present culture still seems to touch the realm of myths through its many attempts to transcend human limitations, such as mortality, restricted intelligence or perception, or our confinement to planet Earth. These are powers that exceed human capabilities and are analogous to the prerogatives of the ancient gods. We imagine that science will grant them to us in a future that may not be so distant, whether through scientific or technological advancements. We project those desires into fictions, and for that reason, "it turns out, indeed, that one of the most striking forms of the resurrection of myth today is science fiction" (Brunel, 1999, p. 906).

In this paper, I will highlight some of the different mythical interpretations that, over the centuries, have been projected upon Mars. I will then examine Dan Simmons' 2-volume series *Ilium* (2003) and *Olympos* (2005), as a contemporary example of *Martian* mythmaking, to understand the way myths might be deployed in science (or speculative) fiction today (Atwood, 2011, pp. 6-7).

2. Myth, science, and the red planet

Mars has always held a special place in our imaginary. Its proximity to Earth made it one of the first to be observed. For ancient civilizations that considered the Earth the center of the universe, Mars was a wandering red star, soon related to blood and war. Indeed, the Egyptians called it the Red One and the Babylonians named it the Star of Death. The Greeks, attentive to its remarkable path of movement, considered it a living being: Ares, the god of war, who would later become the Mars of the Romans — from which most of the versions of the word emerged in Western languages (Sheehan, 1996, p. 3). Due to metonymic identifications in the classical mentality, the planet could be considered both the god or his abode.

The idea that the gods lived in remote lands was a way of symbolizing their unattainability, their otherness. They belonged to a different space and time: a time before history, a space beyond human reach. They had the key to the origin of things and were duly revered for their knowledge and power. Nevertheless, they could also be spoken of with disrespect: Odysseus' account of Ares being caught with Aphrodite in Hephaistos' net to be exposed to the mockery of the other gods (Homer, 2014, pp. 291–297) clearly illustrates this.

Those distant worlds inspired the imagination of early writers of proto science fiction. The Greek writer Antonius Diogenes (circa 2nd century) was the first to describe a voyage to Thule — the capital of Hyperborea, kingdom of the gods — an exotic place situated beyond the known world (Roberts 2016, p. 31–32). Most of the times, those who suggested crossing the distance between gods and men — a gulf greater than any physical separation — were the ones skeptical of their existence. Lucian of Samosata entitles his journey to the Moon and his battles with alien life forms *A true history*. The story ends with his return to Earth, where he encounters mythical animals and heroes, most notably the protagonists of the Trojan War (book 2, chapters 7–15). *A true history* has been highly influential in the science fiction tradition. Lucian's tone — lighthearted and humorous —

and his deployment of intertexts — quotations, allusions, pastiche, parody (Roberts 2016, p. 32)— have influenced contemporary novels such as Simmons', which I will discuss later in this essay.

Those early narratives always had unknown cosmic worlds or else the Moon as their settings. Not until well into the nineteenth century did writers begin to write about Mars, partly due to advances in astronomy that allowed for a more detailed observation of the planet. The first map of Mars was in fact drawn by Richard Anthony Proctor in 1867. Following the cult of science of the time, Proctor named the topographical features after prominent astronomers. But, a few years later, in 1877, Asaph Hall discovered Mars' two moons, and he decided to relive the tradition of naming celestial bodies after mythological characters. He named them Phobos and Deimos, after the twin children of Mars mentioned in the fifteenth book of Homer's *Iliad* (Sheehan, 1996, p. 62). Also in 1877, taking advantage of a great opposition of the planet, the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli drew one of its most famous maps. The topographical features he discovered were quite different of Proctor's, and he named them after important geographical sites in classical literature or the *Bible*. Thus, "Schiaparelli reinforced his map's visual effect of casting Mars as a familiar, Earth-like world" (Lane, 2011, p. 40). By doing so, he intended to link Mars to the foundation of European culture, its symbolism, and mythology. As he stated, following the discussion that his names provoked, "I am ready to adopt later whatever scheme will be recognized as definitive by the proper authority. Until then grant me the chimera of these euphonic names, whose sounds awaken in the mind so many beautiful memories" (Lane, 2011, p. 41).

Indeed, calling upon chimeras had a ripple effect. With his form of naming, Schiaparelli began to create a collective imaginary that would linger for many years. As Sheeran explains:

> It is interesting, and no doubt psychologically significant, that after the introduction of this new map of Mars bearing names so apt to appeal to human emotions, the planet began to gather around itself in succeeding years a considerable mythology of its own. Moreover, it is fitting that this map, whose nomenclature put Mars as much in the realm of mythical as of factual places, should also have been the first to include the strange *canali* or 'canals' which played such an important role in the planet's subsequent mythification. (1996, p. 75)

The history of the *canali* is well known. In his observations, Schiaparelli perceived immense channels on the surface of Mars. He described them as *canali*, which in Italian means both channels and canals, and the term was translated as "canals", i.e., artificially constructed waterways, which led —first some fellow astronomers ant then the general public — to infer that this indicated the existence of intelligent life. The misconstruction was reinforced by contemporary landmarks such as the publication of Darwin's *On the origin of species* (1859) — "based on the concept of adaptation and evolution, writers began to envision alien life as a real possibility" (Caidin, Barbree & Wright, 1997, p. 64) — or the completion of the Suez Canal (1869), an engineering masterpiece that amazed the world by its revolutionary technological innovations. Although at that time the

possibility of flight was in its earliest stages, those advances raised hopes of more sophisticated spaceships.

In addition, astronomers also began to understand that the Moon was uninhabited and could not sustain life. This led them to turn to Mars and its "scientifically discovered" channels. The red planet was no longer assumed to be the kingdom of the god of War, but began to offer the possibility of actually containing forms of intelligent life. The expectations projected onto Mars drove the imaginations to a distant future in which travel to space could be possible and those predictions confirmed.

In general, myths are understood as narratives that refer back to an absolute than is cosmogonic, related to the primeval time, to an origin. But myths can be either cosmogonic or eschatological (Losada, 2012, p. 4), which means that some myths point to a distant future or the end of time. Myths related to cosmic travels usually adopt the latter perspective:

> Every space travel is at the same time a time travel…The cosmic journey is a mirror of the future. It prophesies the disorders of all kinds that await the man and society of tomorrow, and allows to express the hopes and fears many times not formulated that accompany the considerations on these changes. (Mathière, 1999, pp. 853–854)[1]

The myths of the future also seek to understand the radical questions of human nature, such as the origin of life or the reality of death. They remain myths as they forge contact between two worlds, one transcendent and atemporal — inhabited by gods or involving supernatural powers and prerogatives —, the other material and temporal — the one in which we live. Future travel to Mars would become a privileged ground for those projections of the myth to a distant and different future.

Following the discoveries of 1877, popularization of the idea of life on Mars came quickly and soon science fiction narratives projected contemporary anxieties and dreams onto imaginary civilizations:

> Why Martians? Why so many eager speculations and ardent fantasies about Martians, rather than, say, Saturnians or Plutonians? Because Mars seems, at first glance, very Earthlike. It is the nearest planet whose surface we can see. There are polar ice caps, drifting white clouds, raging dust storms, seasonally changing patterns on its red surface, even a twenty-four-hour day. It is tempting to think of it as an inhabited world. Mars has become a kind of mythic arena onto which we have projected our earthly hopes and fears. (Sagan, 1980, p. 106)

Journeys to the Red Planet appeared for the first time in *Across the zodiac* by Percy Greg (1880). The novel does not set out to reach mythical dimension; it mirrors contemporary questions projecting them into a distant world that allows to judge them with greater perspective. It describes with full scientific detail an explorer's trip to Mars, where he compares the aliens' lives and habits with accounts from Indian or African colonialists. Other novels, such as Robert Cromie's *A plunge into space* (1890) or Hugh

[1] All original French quotes are my translation.

MacColl's *Mr. Stranger's sealed packet* (1889) follow the same structure, addressing earth's problems such as the threat of overpopulation (Crossley, 2011, p. 51). However, novels as *Melbourne and Mars* (Joseph Fraser, 1889) and *Uranie* (Camille Flammarion, 1890), blend in contemporary trends in spiritualism, recurring to numinous powers rather than to science to present humans with parallel lives on Mars or to describe a variety of intelligent beings across the universe.

The imaginary surrounding the planet created by these books was soon reinforced by Percival Lowell's Martian essays. This famous astronomer, who became obsessed with the Red Planet after reading Flammarion's *La planète Mars et ses conditions d'habitabilité* (1892), supported the existence of intelligent life on Mars on ostensibly scientific grounds. He went so far as to imagine the immense channels as the creation of an exemplary civilization that was very advanced and, at the same time, peaceful, united, and resourceful when confronted with the harshness of living on Mars. Apart from writing books like *Mars* (1895) and *Mars as the abode of life* (1908), he defended his theories in magazines, newspaper articles and at crowded conferences (Lane, 2011, p. 180).

From that point on, Mars began to serve as a reference model for the problems on Earth. First in this wave was Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant's *Unveiling a parallel: A romance* (1893), which placed a feminist utopia on Mars. In the influential *Auf zwei Planeten* (*Two planets*), by Kurd Lasswitz (1897), Martians come to Earth to help earthlings advance in terms of technology and ethics. Also of interest is Alexander Bogdanov's *Krasnaia zvezda* (*Red star*) (1908), in which a scientist and Bolshevik revolutionist travel to Mars to gather information on a supposedly perfect socialist system. These early examples of Martian science fiction were also social and political utopias: the two genres would be closely related throughout the twentieth century (Bottici, 2007, p. 177).

Nevertheless, those dreamlands were far removed from the tension of the socio-political reality of our world at the time. H. G. Wells' *The war of the worlds*, published in 1898, shifted from the mainstream idea of good aliens to imagining Martians as a strong conquering race that invades Earth and only fails to take control of it because of its vulnerability to common microbes. The novel portrayed Martians threatening the English Empire as a way of passing judgement on the arrogant colonialism of the time. But Wells' book also underlined the fact that in a "planetary romance" our fears are transferred to other worlds and that terrifying creatures "spring from a sophisticated acknowledgement that they are all part of us, of our flesh" (Aldiss & Wingrove, 1986, p. 122). This became still clearer in Orson Welles' famous 1938 radio adaptation of the novel: the panic that followed his announcement that New York was being attacked by Martians connected profoundly with the tragic news that marked daily radio broadcasts during the interwar period (Caidin, Barbree & Wright, 1997, p. 8).

Something similar can be said of the enormous success of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Barsoom series* (1912–1943). In these novels, Barsoom is the local name for Mars, a planet where green, yellow, and red Martians struggle over control of the canals. Notably, like his Depression-era symbol, Tarzan —an apparently vulnerable character who survived in a hostile world thanks to his ingenuity and skill — John Carter and his travels to Mars resonated with the cultural anxieties of the time. Burroughs built his conquest of

territories outside (Earthly) civilization using, as a foundation, the myths and dreams of the "frontier myth", thus blending myths of the past and future (Crossley, 2011, pp. 153–154). Evoking the tradition of the American farming frontier, "the myths which give a special character to art and life in America" (Aldiss & Wingrove, 1986, p. 166), he addressed a shift in the character of the American dream that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century.

3. Towards a change of paradigm

The belief in other intelligent forms of life became highly popular in the early decades of Martian science fiction, and the figure of the alien was identified as a "Martian". But scientific discoveries progressed with the enhancement of technology and our imagination had to adapt to the possibilities this offered. By the 1930s, telescopes and radio astronomy began to reveal the Red Planet's dryness and lack of an atmosphere, and hopes of humanlike life on Mars began to fade. Mars-related fiction took a hard blow and authors were forced to dream up other kinds of life, like bodiless, mysterious, but still intelligent, beings (*The Martian chronicles*, Ray Bradbury, 1950) or strange animals (*The sands of Mars*, Arthur C. Clarke, 1951). Those narratives moved away from former projections of human utopias, but they still presented Mars as a planet that could be conquered, destroyed, transformed, and even colonized by humans. That future could still harbor war, colonialism, corruption, secrecy, but this would imply the beginning of a new reality. In this context, Bradbury affirms: "I realized that what I was doing was writing fairy stories — writing a mythology, doing a Bible really. *The Martian Chronicles* is very much akin to the childhood influences on me of the Old and the New Testament" (Bradbury et al., 1973, p. 19). Meanwhile, popular imagination refused to give up its dream: in those decades UFO sightings became absurdly common, and reports on them appeared regularly in newspapers (Clarke in Bradbury et al., 1973, p. 81).

In the 1960s, Martian fiction became tinged with a dark existentialism. Through texts that reimagined the Red Planet as a difficult colony (*Martian time-slip*, Philip K. Dick, 1964) or even a penitentiary (*Farewell, Earth's bliss*, D. G. Compton, 1966), "the focus shifted from the actual dry Mars to a metaphysically dry Mars" (Hendrix, 2011, p. 148). Subsequent scientific discoveries seemed to confirm this perspective. In 1965 the Mariner 4 probe obtained the first photographs of Mars, definitively demonstrating the planet's barrenness and invalidating the possibility of the existence of Martians. However, the Red Planet seemed nearer and easier to conquer. The possibility of water remained and popular astronomers began to talk of it as a place that could be transformed — *terraformed* — in order to address Earth's possible needs (Robinson 2011, p. 149–150). Viking images from the 1970s definitively boosted this notion of transformation that permeates texts such as James Lovelock and Michael Allaby's *Greening of Mars* (1984) or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars trilogy* (1992–1999).

> Novels from the final decades of the 20th century focused on adapting the planet for human habitation in the context of the technological advances that inspired transhumanist ambitions. Numerous technical advancements gave rise to

> the growing conviction that human bodies could one day be adapted to survive in drastically different conditions from those we currently experience. (Cascales, 2024, pp. 1770-1776)

Gradually, this belief evolved into the idea that science would pave the way for a new species: beyond the turning point of "singularity," humans would attain mythical prerogatives such as immortality, heightened comprehension, and enhanced perception.

In the context of the time, "the transhumanism technoeuphoria forms the endpoint of the trajectory of human perfectibility" (Herbrechter, 2022, p. 11), a goal that seems almost within reach and carries with it a triumphalist rhetoric that underscores the centrality of the human. In this sense, Herbrechter affirms that "in this, transhumanist, sense, posthumans are in fact the apotheosis of a certain understanding of humanism that remains informed by Christian eschatological motifs" (2022, p. 11). Indeed, this imagined new race has led narratives on the Red Planet to update the myth of the Eternal Return: the threat of a terrestrial apocalypse gives way to a Golden Age of immortal posthumans living in a utopian Mars. These novels also often present a renewed version of the "frontier myth", which gives them the epic tone that often marks the foundation stories of nations or cultural identities.

Frederick Turner's impressive *Genesis: An epic poem of the terraforming of Mars* (1988) exemplifies this trend. The daring and straightforward title of this verse narrative, in the style of ancient epics, signals a new beginning where humans appropriate divine powers. It combines scientific information and characters inspired by Greek mythology, Dante, and Milton. Adding to Martian mythology, it suggests that, in cosmic conquest, physical transformation is not the only necessary development: a new philosophy appropriate for the establishment of a new life and culture are equally urgent. Turner rightly argues that "terraforming" may be understood as a material term, but is, in fact, a concept full of complex cultural, social, and intellectual facets (Crossley, 2011, pp. 247–258).

Dan Simmons' two-volume series *Ilium* / *Olympos* (2003–2005) also envisions terraforming Mars and is likewise concerned with understanding any development of a possible future world as a multilayered design. The inspiration of both narratives in classical literature stems from the desire that any future civilization rest on the bedrock of the transcendental quests that inspired the principles at the base of our understanding of human nature.

Such a solemn statement might appear to contradict the satirical and humorous tone of Simmons' narratives. Certainly, his tone is not as serious as Turner's, and his numerous depictions of cybernetic technology and research on biotechnology or bioengineering may mislead us. Nevertheless, their theses have more in common that meets the eye. At the end of the day, Simmons presents a conflict that is overcome through the work of the few remaining old-style humans that recover the wisdom that classical books contain.

This shared focus on the core of the humanist tradition is key in Simmons' work. It situates his approach within what Braidotti would term a "reactive approach" (2013, p. 38) to the posthuman, not to be confused with how the term is understood today in the context of critical posthumanism. The series features beings referred to as post-humans:

"most of the humans appear to have evolved into some sort of post-human status and moved off the planet into orbital ring cities…but there are a few hundred thousand old-style human beings left" (Simmons, 2005, p. 36). The term "post-human" in this context refers to a vision shaped by transhumanist aspirations — one in which human beings enhance themselves through technology to transcend biological limitations.

However, posthumanism today encompasses a complex critical stance that challenges humanism, particularly the idea of human exceptionalism within its biological, mechanical, and environmental contexts. Current posthumanist thought seeks to redefine subjectivity, ethics, and, more broadly, our relationship with the world around us, including technology and artificial intelligence. As said, Simmons' novel does not align with this perspective. Instead, as his texts grapple with these questions what stands out — like in many others novels of his time — is how firmly they remain committed to a classical version of the human subject (Hayles, 1999, p. 281).

4. Dan Simmons' *Ilium/Olympos*

Ilium (2003) and *Olympos* (2005) are complex novels that blend science fiction with classical references, a humorous parody, and intertextuality, subverting the genre's tradition with a postmodern turn (Palmer, 1999; Grobéty, 2015, p. 264). In them, three parallel plots converge at the end. They refer back to ancient myths, with which the author plays freely and comically, and connect with the mythical dreams of the transhumanist horizon.

The first of these plots, for which the series is named, is a reenactment of the Trojan War that takes place on terraformed Mars. There, as in Homer's account, we find humans and ancient gods in action. Here, however, the "gods" are playful post-humans, almost all-powerful because of quantum technology. They had abandoned Earth centuries before to live on Mars, where they mimic the personalities, powers, and behaviors of the Greek inhabitants of Olympus. They follow the "script" of the *Iliad* until their quarrels become real and alter the plot. There is a mythical sense of hubris in this mighty but meaningless new race of gods. They "are" powerful, but do not understand the science that allow their improvements nor why they are involved in a war (Périer, 2011, p. 67). Because they are illiterate, they do not know how the conflict will end, and can only perform their roles like sophisticated puppets. Thus, this storyline embodies the loss of cultural memory that took place with the original Trojan War, a historical event converted by oral accounts into legend and ultimately into myth. Also, the gods here are so oblivious that they inspire in the reader a deep-rooted fear that non-intelligent or non-sentient robots may take control of our lives.

Simmons' choice of Mars as the scene of events evokes Schiaparelli's desire to awake meaningful memories. Evoking the blood spilled in ancient battles, the Red Planet was the perfect landscape for a renewed performance of the Trojan war. And as the tallest volcano in Mars — the tallest known feature on the solar system — was named by the Italian astronomer "Nix Olympica", — slightly modified afterwards to "Olympus Mons"

— so it was fitting that the mighty posthumans choose to live there.[2] Thus Simmons consciously roots his story in the Greek tradition and the epics of Western culture that was born around the Mediterranean, making it counterbalance the perils that will derive from a hypertechnologized posthuman society.

The series' second plot tells the story of a group of powerful biomechanical sentient organisms called moravecs (named after roboticist and futurist Hans Moravec). They come from the moons of Jupiter and are sent to Mars because a huge deployment of quantum energy has been detected there that could imperil the solar system. Upon their arrival, most of them are destroyed by the "gods"; only two of them, saved by the Little Green Men, survive. These two moravecs are literature enthusiasts: Mahnmut of Europe is an expert on Shakespeare's sonnets, and Orphu of Io knows Proust by heart. Their combined wisdom will allow these two guerrilla fighters to take on this simulated but powerful new Olympus. In spite of the technological inspiration of their name, these beings are congenial and innocent; their love for literature lends their discourse humanistic depth.

The novels' third plot line reveals what happens on Earth. There, we find a remnant of old-style humans that live a life of peace and ease. They have forgotten how to read and think, have robotic servants ("voynix") and devote their lives to endless parties. We understand why this civilization is in decline when Savi calls them "eloi", after Wells' characters in *The time machine*, leading readers to infer that hedonism and superficiality have degenerated their race and their culture (Wells, 1931, p. 89). Still, the whole galactic system depends on their ability to read for salvation. Only if they recover their capacity to tell stories, they can reclaim the meaning of their lives and provide a new beginning for them and for other sentient beings. Thus, the plot involving old-style humans becomes a modern epic, a narrative that recalls the foundations of Western culture. It revolves around the figure of Harman, a new Prometheus that will allow the beginning of a renewed humanity.

The three plots merge and conclude after two wars. The first one takes place on Mars and ends with the complete destruction of the planet. The second is on Earth, where humans are waging their own war against Prospero — an avatar of the evolved and self-aware Earth logosphere — and the violent evil god Setebos. The destruction of the thoughtless posthuman race and the help of the learned moravecs give way to a new, wise human culture.

5. Myths of the future on Mars

Simmons' version of a technologically based future can be read as a modern variation on ancient myths: "Just as myths from previous ages taught individuals how to function in the societies they lived in, science fiction tells modern people how to live in our own society, a society that relies on science and technology" (Klein, 2012, p. 256).

[2] To this end, they conquer the native inhabitants, the Little Green Men. Although of little consequence in the book, they are mentioned in order to record the tradition of Martian colonization.

As noted in the description of the plots, Simmons does not appropriate the structure and the themes of myth lightly. As he explains:

> The role of my *Ilium* is, in a much more humble way, the same as the role of Homer's *Iliad* 3,000 years ago — first of all to entertain, then to enlighten or provoke thought when it can, always to tell a large tale but never at the expense of losing sight of truth of the human (and other) characters in it, and, finally, once again, to explore the complexities of the human heart in conflict with itself. (Silver, 2003, n.p.)

This scope — the truth of the human— is key to the novel, centered on the character of this Harman-Prometheus who, through an epic quest, will recover for humanity the fire of wisdom, the knowledge of what it means to be human, symbolized in the ability to read.

Despite their titles, *Ilium* and *Olympos* transcend the Greek classics. Simmons' second great source of inspiration comes from Shakespeare's *The tempest*, revisited in Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*. The Bard's last play appeals to twenty and twenty-first century readers and spectators, probably because its hybrid nature blends life and art, reality and fantasy. *The tempest* is a play about hope in which all the misdoings that cause the initial tragedy seem to fade away in the forgiving end. It articulates a new beginning that will give way to a new world. With those echoes, Simmons' Mars becomes another remote island, a new version of the scenario for the collapse of a declining culture that will lead to the beginning of a new golden age.

On the basis of these two classical references, and many other secondary ones, Simmons explores the fears and dreams we project onto an imagined future. Among them I have selected three that I find specially meaningful: immortality, introduced by the gods' science; the creation of intelligent beings, projected onto the moravecs; and the desire to develop an enhanced (post)human civilization, put into question by the figure of Harman-Prometheus.

5.1. Calypso and the desire for immortality

Science fiction addresses our contemporary quests, and evidence suggests that immortality is chief among them (Stableford & Langford, 2020). In the novels, the quests appear linked to the powerful image of the goddess Calypso, known for having offered Odysseus immortality and eternal youth if he stays with her on the island — a proposal that the Greek hero eventually declines.

Odysseus' encounter with Calypso in the Homerian account reminds us of human beings' desire and quest for immortality, and how that gift is one that only the gods can bestow. Nevertheless, the eternal pleasures promised are not enough to make the hero forget his desire for adventure, or his "nostalgia", his longing for home.

In Simmons' *Olympos*, the personality and name of Calypso are blended with those of two other enchantresses: Circe — who has often been mistaken for Calypso — and Sycorax, the witch in Shakespeare's *The tempest*, who has, in turn, has also been compared with mythical sorceresses like Medea and Circe (Orgel, 1997, p. 19–20). All

these women embody feminine power with traditional features of seduction and magic linked to the promise of immortality. Closer to us, Sycorax also carries colonialist connotations: she is a racialized sorcerer whose dark skin is identified with dark powers (Lara, 2007, p. 91).

In *Olympos*, Calypso-Sycorax is the preeminent character among the few that have retained both the science and wisdom responsible for the posthuman development of the universe. She embodies the knowledge that captivates and beckons us today: science and technology. Thus, she offers Odysseus a scientific immortality. But for this to be a mythical gift, it should mean not only an enhancement of human nature — mere longevity — but another kind of life, that we imagine reserved to the gods.

This tension shapes their dialogue. Calypso-Sycorax offers to preserve Odysseus from death through technological "rejuvenation tanks", but the hero is reluctant. First, because he does not care for himself alone, his claim here is to preserve all humanity from death. Also, because thinking about divine prerogatives with a down-to-earth mind does not work well. Mere immortality hides the danger of meaninglessness: "One thing immediately noticeable about this rich literary tradition is that immortality is often treated as a false goal, sometimes as a curse" (Stableford & Langford, 2020). Living forever just for pleasure, as Sycorax-Circe offers, does not fulfill inner human desires.

This is why Odysseus counterattacks: he wants much more than the technological Sycorax offers: "'You ask much of me, for an old and non-Odysseus.'…'What would you give me in return?'" (Simmons, 2005, p. 604). In turn, he promises much more than requested: "Tales of my travels" (Simmons, 2005, p. 604). As the original Odysseus suggested to Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians (Homer, 2014, p. 317), the words of a good narrator can fill the mind and the heart, enticing and entertaining listeners until they forget time, thus making immortality meaningful. In *The tempest* Sycorax has died long before the action begins, but a similar notion has been understood as the meaning of the work: "over the course of the play, Shakespeare transmutes magic from an instrument of political domination into a form of artistic creation whose only effect is to provide a joyous experience that blessedly, if temporarily, obscures the reality of death" (Guenther, 2012, p. 87).

Ultimately, Odysseus gets what he wants. There is no need of Athena here, as Simmons emphasizes that the human ability to narrate becomes a form of divine power. If science or the gods ever bestow immortality on us, longevity will require stories: our spiritual capacity to create and enjoy narrative will help us negotiate eternity. Also, both *Ilium* and *Olympos* validate classical literature's immortality when the reader discovers that old answers are still useful for contemporary challenges.

5.2. Proust revisited: Imagination and the creation of intelligent beings

As mentioned, the moravecs are the protagonists in the novel's second plot, which features explorers and workers from the moons of Jupiter. We follow mainly two of them, Manhmut, the specialist in Shakespeare's sonnets, and Orphu, a Proust enthusiast.

They are good friends and share readings, what leads them to discover that those authors are different in "tone and language and structure, but something is – the same,

[because they share an] obsession with the puzzle of what it means to be human" (Simmons, 2003, p. 104). It is fitting that Shakespeare and Proust address what it means to be human, but for intelligent and sentient robots to ask these questions becomes disconcerting.

As they approach Mars, Orphu explains to Mahnmut three ways through which Proust explored what it means to be human: aristocracy of character, love and art, universal drives that move mankind, values that reach the very core of humanity. As he describes a fourth and definitive trait, the moravecs are attacked by the gods that live on Mars. As a way to take some heat out this critical situation, Mahnmut asks his friend:

> All right, what does Proust say about surviving on Mars?…
> Marcel says that if we suddenly found ourselves on Mars and grew a pair of wings and a new respiratory system, it would not take us out of ourselves", said Orphu. "Not as long as we have to use our same senses. Not as long as we're stuck in our same consciousnesses.
> "You're kidding", said Mahnmut. (Simmons, 2003, pp. 171–172)

He was not. Proust actually mentions travels to Mars in his writings in order to conclude that, were we to go there, we would only find a different landscape; we would remain the same. A century later, it is not so farfetched to think that we may end up growing wings or devising new bioengineered lungs. But Proust had already asserted that even if we attain superhuman physical powers no real change would happen; a change in our physical condition would not modify our inner human selves.

In the fragment Orphu quotes, the narrator of *Remembrance of things past* declares that:

> … the only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is. (Proust, 1932, p. 559)

Thus, cosmic travel is again linked to an immortality understood not as a mere extension of life, but as Eternal Youth, the fullness of interest of a young open mind. Those "hundred others" amount to the worldview that we share in oral and written conversations, in friendship and books. Novelty comes not from unexplored lands, but from the imagination; it comes from stories that nurture creativity and allow us to see with many different, wise, and visionary eyes. Moreover, the willingness to record personal and cultural footprints, that is, to recover memory — *Remembrance of things past* — may also be understood as a voyage in time (Shattuck, 2000: 239).

When Mahnmut understands the power of imagination he forgets that they are being attacked by all-powerful gods and guesses Proust's forth trait of humanity: "Consciousness escaping the limits of consciousness, … Imagination outstripping the bounds of imagination" (Simmons 2003, p. 172). The capacity of humans to make their dreams come true. Like in the customary sequence of events —from Icarus to airplanes, from Star Wars to real holograms— in *Olympos*, imagination will become "real". The

moravecs will eventually discover that Mars has become the ground for a rendering of an imagined universe. The Trojan and Achaean warriors fighting there are actually advanced holograms, the gods are just enhanced artificial beings.

Proust may not have envisioned this actual embodiment of ideas. But he asserts in a much quoted text, that "the creation of the world did not occur at the beginning of time, it occurs every day" (Proust, 1932, p. 853). As happens with empires or powerful families, what seemed everlasting gets destroyed and reconstructed over and over again. In the wars of *Illium* and *Olympos* the all — (technologically) — powerful creatures are in fact defeated by human wisdom. The creation of intelligent creatures is a recurring myth that has led the human mind to create golems to androids. Its hubris comes with the recurring fears of those creatures rebelling against their creators, a situation not so different from the contemporary alienation of human beings by technological progress. But Simmons suggests that technological power is as perishable as the ancient kingdoms, that the only transcendent power is the one that make us humans, our inner self. As Shattuck concludes, Proust presents art "as the exercise of communication that leads us back into life…of 'life as worth living'" (Shattuck, 2000, p. 159). He even suggests, evoking *A thousand and one nights*, "that our very survival depends on it in the face of imminent death" (Shattuck, 2000, p. 160).

5.3. The posthuman Prometheus

In the third plot of the novel, Harman, an old man with a youthful body and adventurous spirit takes on the task of recovering transcendence – narration, imagination, creativity. In contrast with the flat, pointless, and ignorant life of his fellow men, curiosity spurs him on an audacious search that leads him to recover humanity's lost knowledge, the ability to read. Surviving a personal odyssey, he rescues mankind from its Eloi-like existence and from the machinations of posthuman gods and other dark forces.

This fact makes him a new Prometheus. In the ancient myth, Prometheus was a complex character that strived to obtain knowledge — symbolized in fire — and helped mankind. Those achievements have made him a reference in science fiction from the very beginning: "If there is one Classical myth that is key to SF, one figure that SF has adopted as its (literal) torchbearer, then that figure is Prometheus" (Keen, 2017, p. 314). Harman's recovery of humanistic allows him to understand the nickname Savi was calling him:

> He understood now why she kept calling him 'my young Prometheus.' Prometheus, according to Hesiod, meant 'foresighted' or 'prophetic' and the character Prometheus in Aeschylus, and in the works of Shelley, Wu, and other great poets, was the Titan revolutionary who stole essential knowledge – fire – from the gods and brought it down to the groveling human race, elevating them into something almost like gods. (Simmons, 2005, p. 505)

In *Illium* and *Olympus* Harman updates the ancient characteristics of the Prometheus myth, moving beyond the enhanced posthuman. In the context of mere prolonged survival, technical knowledge, and alienated wellbeing, he recovers the wisdom, creativity and imagination that make sense of all those advancements, thus

allowing for a meaningful and complete life. As a contemporary epic hero, he is "the specific imaginative creation of a specific sociopolitical group, whose ethos he constructs and supports in and by his *muthos*" (Miller, 2000, p. 370). In this case, Harman-Prometheus stands for those who still defend the values of the humanist tradition from within the postmodern paradigm of our times.

Harman's main opponents in the novels are Setebos and Caliban. Critics have signaled the latter as portraying, in Shakespeare's play, the role of the wild Savage that English civilization should educate and therefore "Westernize" — just as Mars needs to be "terraformed". Nevertheless, Caliban rejects language as a form of oppression (Greenblatt, 1990, pp. 32–36). In *Olympos*, Setebos comes out in favor of his offspring facing Prospero: "I taught him power. You taught him pain" (Simmons, 2005, p. 129). In fact, Caliban's rebellion against language stems from his belief that education "should have yielded [him] independence and power" (Lindsay, 2016, p. 416). The memory of tradition, reading, is here the "white magic" that Harman uses to ultimately defeat both the posthuman Greek-like gods and the demonic beings that reject education in favor of power.

It is no accident that this new commencement takes place on Earth and specifically in the Mediterranean Basin. As Prospero in *The tempest* or the narrator's last souvenirs in *Remembrance of things past*, Harman will return to the place he belongs to. From the beginning of Martian fiction, the Red Planet was imagined as the place where advanced technology and, often, an ethically superior civilization existed. A different yet familiar planet where humans could expand and improve their lives. Inhabited or not, it could be colonized and — in later proposals — also terraformed to allow a new Genesis. However, this process was imagined as a mere escalation of power, as a prideful deployment of technical capabilities with no aim apart from survival.

But this is not enough for human beings. To make sense of the immortality we yearn for we need to preserve our narratives. And those stories that remind us of what it means to be human are the legends of our planet Earth. As Wagner explains, "Simmons, at a deeper level, offers this saga as his love letter to the purely human art of storytelling, and the way that our heroic myths and romances and tragedies have shaped and continue to shape civilization" (Wagner, 2005). Those stories that have formed our world are well rooted in terrestrial places; Olympus Mons may be one of the most paradigmatic of them. All our dreams of Mars ultimately reflect the odysseys we battle today on Earth.

6. Final remarks

To conclude, we should remember that the idea of Mars as a place for renewed humanity dates back to Lowell at the beginning of the twentieth century. From then on, "Mars narratives are often 'origin' narratives" (Stanley et al., 2018, p. 94), linked to etiologies and the Promethean myth. The first Greek narrators of travel to space were unable to see planets as worlds, and the first cosmic maps mostly reflected what scientists wanted to see. Their imagination fancied Mars as the ideal spot for extraterrestrial life and for projecting utopias of alien societies. In these projections, new myths advanced the transcendental meaning of contemporary dreams and fears into a distant future —

from peaceful societies united in the construction of channels and civilizations that assure economic and gender equality, to conquering races that invade Earth.

When science revealed the true barren face of Mars, narratives of new life for humans in a terraformed world took over. Today, when the idea of living on Mars is no longer a foolish dream, the Red Planet remains fertile ground for mythmaking. In this context Simmons' *Ilium* and *Olympus* explore a technological future through dialogue with ancient myths. They challenge our current scientific paradigms, in which reflections on human enhancement mostly take into account physical conditions, by proposing that, as Proust taught us, we need to focus on our inner world. For that, we need to read the stories that have shaped our social and cultural history. Only then can we comprehend the immortality that modern Circes and Sycoraxes offer us today. Therefore, Harman-Prometheus symbolizes not a modern hero, but an embodiment of those who still want to read the ancient epics, convinced that myths and epic narratives give us the inner wisdom to properly understand our profoundest desires. In this way, whether on Mars or on Earth, we can experience a meaningful and fulfilling existence.

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