HOMER

THE ILIAD

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Introduction by Andrew Ford

INTRODUCTION

The Iliad and the Anger of Achilles

The Iliad is both a landmark in the history of literature and a relic of its prehistory, so that to read it today is to encounter two masterpieces of ancient narrative at once. The first and more familiar is *The Iliad* as the "Song of Troy" (the meaning of "Iliad"), a classic text that stands at the beginning of a Western epic tradition more than twenty-five centuries old. The other work is the "Anger of Achilles," which is how the poem titles itself in its first line; this was a long, orally performed song of ancient heroes, one of many that had been sung in Greece and the Near East since time immemorial. We cannot be sure why, out of all these songs, the "Anger of Achilles" was selected to be written down and handed on to posterity; it appears not to aspire to be *the* song of Troy, for its story is restricted to a few weeks toward the end of that very long war, and not even the final weeks at that. But the song is certainly ambitiously made: it manages both to recall the tangled events that preceded its story and to evoke the great destruction imminent at its end. The "Anger of Achilles" became *The Iliad* because it suggests, despite its focus on a single episode in Akhilleus' meteoric life, the utter devastation of the Trojan War and gives it meaning through the eyes of its hero. Robert Fitzgerald's subtle and strong translation brings out the grave tones of the original, and is exemplary in helping us follow its sustained intensity of focus alongside its massive comprehensiveness.

The Greeks themselves had already canonized *The Iliad* by the fifth century B.C. (when the title "Iliad" is first attested). In the high-classical culture of Athens, *The Iliad*, along with its sequel, *The Odyssey*, was memorized by schoolboys, performed to vast audiences in public arenas and studied closely by scholars in lectures and monographs. When Greece fell under the sway of Rome in the third and second centuries, *The Iliad* began its metamorphosis from great national epic into the first poem of Europe. The philhellenic elites of the Roman Empire, for whom

Greek was virtually a second language, used Homer's texts as a staple of higher education and ranked the heroic epic as the noblest of poetic genres. Such was his prestige that when Virgil aspired to compose the national Roman poem, he built his *Aeneid* squarely upon Homer: its first six books followed *The Odyssey* to tell how Aineias survived the fall of Troy and made his way to Italy, and the last six books closely refashioned *The Iliad* to recount the tragic war he fought there to found a new civilization. Virgil's achievement quickly became canonical itself and ensured that the European epic tradition would ground itself on the authority and practice of Homer. Even when Greek culture receded in the Western Empire, Homer's matter proliferated in Latin translations, digests, and reworkings, which nurtured an ideal of heroism for medieval epics and Troy romances. The Greek poems themselves, continuously transcribed and studied in Byzantium, reasserted their presence in Western Europe from the early Renaissance, first in Latin translations for writers like Boccaccio and Chaucer, and finally in the first published Greek text, printed at Florence in 1488. A new wave of translations, such as George Chapman's *Iliad* (1588–1611), brought Homer's poems into the vernaculars. Shakespeare may have consulted Chapman for his *Troilus and Cressida* (1602?), which animated Iliadic scenes and characters in a gorgeous, Latinate blank verse that set an example for Milton. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Pope's *Iliad* represent the Homeric apogee of the classical epic tradition; the Romantic preference for personal lyric over heroic epic did not extinguish Homer's influence, and the twentieth century found powerful new ways to use the old poem, from Joyce's *Ulysses* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. Of the works preserved from antiquity, only the Hebrew Scriptures can rival Homer for the length and breadth of his influence.[1]

Homer has often been called the "father of Western literature," but history is never so neat. Tracing literary traditions to individual inventors not only oversimplifies—*The Iliad* is far from being the oldest epic in the world—but obscures the amazingly rich and complex traditions that lie behind the work. Homer's poem is an old one with some undeniable quirks and lapses. There are, for example, certain difficulties in detail, such as the hero Pylaimenês, who is killed in the fifth book but pops up alive again in Book XIII; such Homeric "nods" are now understood as the result of the difficulties of fixing flexible oral traditions into a text. But other episodes in the poem are curiously motivated, as if they had been transferred from another context, and there are a few downright

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[1] The immense story of Homer's reception is very well told in Howard Clark, *Homer's Readers: A Historical Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Newark, 1981).

puzzles that are best explained as resulting from a poet coping with contradictory traditions. The special demands of oral performance also account for the fact that Homer's style tolerates a good deal more repetition in phrasing and scene construction than modern readers are used to. Locating the epic in its place and time, then, can prepare readers for Homer's expansive and sometimes allusive mode of storytelling, and for the special flavor of his traditional language. To put *The Iliad* in its historical contexts also makes it at least as fascinating as when it is seen as the product of a single artistic genius. In fact, the two perspectives are finally inseparable: serving as a repository of the past in an unlettered culture, the singer of epic aspired to be traditional, to retell the oldest stories without obvious novelty or idiosyncrasy; yet these same traditions were so profuse and so many-sided in their meanings that only the strongest poetic vision could have wrought from them the definitive shaping that is *The Iliad*.

Epics Before Homer

On most estimates, *The Iliad* as we know it first came into shape sometime between 750 and 650 B.C. The traditional nature of the epic language makes it hard to date precisely, and some scholars are pushing it toward the sixth century.[2] Because of its undeniable overall design, it is convenient to follow Greek tradition and call the person who gave it final form Homer, with the qualification that this name only crops up about a century later than the poem and is enshrouded from the first in folktale and fancy. (One of the earliest details preserved about Homer is that he was blind; singing would have been a plausible occupation for a blind man in archaic Greece, but the story could well have been inspired by the portrayal of a respected blind singer in the eighth book of *The Odyssey*.)[3] Whether the same poet composed both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* has

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[2] Good short accounts of current research on Homer and Homeric poetry can be found in the third edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, edited by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (Oxford, 1996). The scholarly six-volume *The Iliad: A Commentary*, edited by G. S. Kirk et al. (Cambridge, 1985–1993), contains excellent, readable essays on major topics of Homeric research. A stimulating collection of critical essays is *Homer*, edited with an introduction by Harold Bloom (New York, 1986).

[3] The standard book and line enumeration of the Greek texts may have been imposed by ancient scholars long after Homer; the implications of this question for reading *The Iliad* are richly discussed in Oliver Taplin, *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad* (Oxford, 1992).

been debated since antiquity, but need not concern us here. What is very clear is that *The Iliad*, even if it was as early as 750, came out of a very old tradition of heroic song. Archaeologists and philologists have identified in Homer relics of artifacts and linguistic forms that must date to the Greek Bronze Age of the middle second millennium. Comparative linguistics has traced even deeper roots, reaching back beyond the early third millennium when the peoples who would become the Greeks first broke off from their kindred linguistic groups and descended into the Balkan peninsula. Scholars who can compare early Greek poetry with the epic traditions of ancient India have found affinities in theme and phraseology with the stories of noble warriors, wife-stealing, and dynastic struggle with the gods that are told in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Reconstructing what are called Indo-European traditions accounts for the commonalities that can be found between Homer's heroes and such distant kin as the Irish Cuchulain and the Germanic Siegfried.

Alongside these ancestral inheritances, *The Iliad* also clearly reflects the influence of Near Eastern civilizations, for the time in which the poem came into shape was also one of strong Eastern influence on Greek culture.[4] The very fact that we have a text of *The Iliad* documents this influence, for the song could not have been written down without the alphabet that the Greeks adapted from a Western Semitic script sometime in the eighth century. Greece had contacts, some mercantile and some hostile, with Eastern peoples during the Bronze Age, and by the eighth century had founded thriving cities on the western coast of present-day Turkey. The blending of Greek and West Asiatic traditions can be seen in so central a figure as Zeus: dwelling on the peak of Mount Olympus and wielding the thunderbolt, Zeus has an Indo-European pedigree as a sky- and weather-god; this is indicated by the etymology of his name, which comes from a root (*deiw-*) meaning "shining," "bright." (The connection between god and the sky is reflected in two English descendents of this root, "day" and "divine," as well as in the name of the Old Norse sky-god Tyr.)[5] We can also infer that Zeus figured in Indo-

[4] Major studies are: Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), and Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997).

[5] The fourth edition of the *American Heritage College Dictionary* (Boston, 2000) offers an excellent conspectus of Indo-European languages by Calvert Watkins. For a subtle reading of *The Iliad* in these terms, see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore and London, 1979).

European religion as a father-god, for the compound expression "Zeus the father" is found not only in archaic Greek but in Sanskrit ("Dyaus pitar") and Latin ("Ju-piter," i.e., "Zeus pater"). But when Homer fleshes out this picture by showing Zeus presiding over a council of gods or by recounting how he rose to kingship by violently overthrowing his father, the nearest parallels are to be found among such figures as the Babylonian Marduk and the Hurrian-Hittite Kumarbi. Perhaps the most striking Eastern literary antecedent to *The Iliad* is the story of Gilgamesh, which derives from Sumerian legends that reach back to the third millennium. Like Akhilleus, this heroic king of Uruk (Biblical Erech) had a divine mother and a mortal father and set out on a great exploit to win undying fame; in the course of that enterprise his dear companion in arms, Enkidu, died in his stead, much as Akhilleus lost Patróklos; both heroes then fell into excessive grief that was only resolved by coming to terms with their own mortality. By the time *The Iliad* was written down, *Gilgamesh* had been the most popular heroic saga throughout the Near East for a thousand years, being translated and transmitted on baked clay tablets through the lands of Asia Minor and all the way to the Mediterranean. Homer's notional position as the first of epic poets owes much to the fact that Assurbanipal's library in Nineveh, where the so-called standard version of *Gilgamesh* we read today was edited, was destroyed at the end of the seventh century B.C. The poem thus began to retreat from sight until it was rediscovered, accidentally, in 1872.[6]

The mothers of Homer are, by contrast, quite easy to name: these are the Muses invoked by all Greek epic poets at the beginning of their songs. As daughters of Mnemosyne, "memory," the Muses personify oral tradition, and Greek song traditions about Troy constitute the third and most immediate context in which to locate *The Iliad*. An obvious starting point for these traditions is the fall of Troy itself, for there was indeed a city of Troy, and it does seem to have suffered a series of disasters around the time that later Greek scholars set for the Trojan War, 1184 B.C. We know this because of the pioneering archaeological labors of Henreich Schliemann, who, in a time when Homer was regarded as pure fantasy, followed up clues in *The Iliad* to the northwest coast of Turkey a mile or two from the entrance to the Dardanelles. There, beneath a mound at Hissarlik, he found a ruined city, a small one but which was several times burned and finally abandoned at the end of the

[6] A fine scholarly introduction and translation is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated with an introduction by Andrew George (London, 1999).

twelfth century. Schliemann confidently assigned the fall of this city to the Trojan War, and could point for support to other ruins he uncovered on the Greek mainland, huge palatial complexes that testified to a powerful Bronze Age Greek civilization. This Mycenean culture, called after one of its centers at Mykênê, the traditional kingdom of Agamémnon, flourished from the middle second millennium to around 1100 B.C., just long enough to allow it to have sent an armada to the east. There may be, then, a kernel of historical truth at the bottom of the tale of Troy. But it should be born in mind that, for an eighth-century audience, stories about the great old days were as liable to exaggeration and idealization as American sagas of the Wild West or English legends of King Arthur. Analogies like the *Song of Roland* (ca. 1100) show that an historical event—in this case, a small skirmish in Charlemagne's wars with the Saracens around 788—can be radically transformed by centuries of creative retelling. We must allow for a good deal of mythmaking in the similar chronological span that separates Homer from Troy.

When the centers of Mycenean civilization collapsed, many Greeks migrated eastward, carrying their songs and cultural traditions with them. From then until the eighth century, legends of Troy percolated, mixing with older stories of mainland wars such as the tale of the Seven Against Thebes (parts of which are recalled by Iliadic heroes) or the legends of Hêraklês (who is credited with an earlier sack of Troy). Unfortunately, these crucial centuries are so little known from archaeology, except for a general impression of disunity and of diminished cultural production, that they are called the Dark Ages. The relative disunity of Greek civilization at this time can be seen in the fact that Homer has no general name for "Greeks." He calls the army attacking Troy by the names of prominent Bronze Age peoples, the Argives, Akhaians, or Danáäns; the name that eventually came to serve for Greece, Hellas, refers in Homer only to a district in the northern mainland. At the same time, Homeric epic attests to a sudden rise in cultural ambition that is so rapid and widespread that the eighth century is sometimes called the Greek Renaissance. Signs of renewed collective enterprise and an increased sense of national identity are the Olympic games, founded in 766 B.C., the establishment of an oracular center for all Greeks at Delphi, and a new wave of colonization and exploration that expanded the Greek horizons from the straits of Gibraltar to the Black Sea beyond the Troad.[7] It has

[7] A. M. Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece: An Archaeological Survey of the Eleventh to the Eighth Centuries B.C.* (Edinburgh, at the University Press, 1971); and his *Homer and the Artists: Text and Picture in Early Greek Art* (Cambridge, 1998).

been noted that a main concern of *The Iliad* is the difficulties of keeping together a massive but tenuously united coalition. Hence when Homer chose to sing the "Anger of Achilles," his theme had a symbolic resonance that songs of Thebes or Hêraklês did not: the first Greek epic written down told a story of a great and ultimately successful collective effort to vindicate the honor of Greece against a powerful eastern foe.

Greek Epic in the Eighth Century

We can glimpse the traditions behind *The Iliad* only indirectly, for it is the oldest Greek poem we have; linguists place it earlier than *The Odyssey* by about a generation (though our tools are not sharp enough to exclude the possibility that both poems were composed by a single, long-lived singer). Their shared patterns of phrasing and storytelling point to a common tradition behind them, as do the songs of Hesiod who lived around 700 B.C.: Hesiod uses the same meter as the Homeric poems, he shares much of their artificial poetic diction, and the stories he tells of early gods and heroes dovetail in many cases with the personnel of Trojan epics. One can get a further glimpse of the range of earlier songs by consulting the collection of so-called *Homeric Hymns*, early, epic-style songs to divinities, and the fragmentary remains of what is called the Epic Cycle, a series of epics that fleshed out the whole story of Troy from the origins of the war to the return of the last hero to Greece.[8] These poems began to be written down in the seventh century, in the wake of Homer's popularity; but it is clear that in many cases they retell stories that were already circulating when Homer began to sing.

Like the Trojan expedition itself, *The Iliad* is a great marshaling of stories that Homer had to pick, combine, and shape. On the Greek side, we can see Homer limiting his cast of principal characters in a famous scene from the third book that is called the *teikhoskopia*, the "view from the walls": as Helen and Priam gaze down from Troy's walls at the assembled Greeks, she picks out for the king a few notable figures. In the absence of Akhilleus, Agamémnon, Menelâos, Odysseus, and Aías are singled out. Agamémnon, king of Mykênê, and Menelâos, king of nearby Sparta, are the sons of Atreus. (They are sometimes so called,

[8] The most recent editor of the Greek text of *The Iliad*, Martin L. West, has translated this material for The Loeb Classical Library: *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003) and *Greek Epic Fragments from the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries B.C.* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

"Atreidês," as Akhilleus may be Aiakídes, "grandson of Aeacus," the father of Pêleus.) Though Menelâos has suffered the insult that caused the war, the expedition is led by Agamémnon because he can marshal the biggest force. It is not true, as Akhilleus charges, that Agamémnon shirks battle; he can fight well, but is subject to repeated moods of doubt and vacillation. His chief councilor is Nestor from Pylos, an aged king given to lamenting that he no longer has the strength of his youth. Nestor is sometimes taken as a garrulous old Polonius; but experience is greatly respected in his society, and his long speeches play a role in several of the poem's turning points.[9] Helen does not mention Nestor, and this may indicate that Homer has enlarged his role in the saga, both to provide a foil to Agamémnon's imprudence and to widen the scope of his tale with Nestor's recollections of long-ago cattle raids in southwest Peloponnesus.

Behind Nestor in backing up Agamémnon is Odysseus, whose character conforms to the brave, eloquent, and successful warrior that he is in *The Odyssey*. But the title of "best of the Akhaians," after Akhilleus, is bestowed instead on Aías, the son of Telamon (distinguished from the "lesser Aías," the son of Oileus). Helen has little to say about Aías, who is a strong, silent type, a defender rather than a berserker. Compared both to a tower and to a stubborn mule as he steadfastly resists the Trojans, he is less agile and voluble than Odysseus, and the poet knows the story (clearly alluded to in *The Odyssey*) that the two clashed after Akhilleus' death: when the army had to decide who would be awarded Akhilleus' immortal armor, it was Odysseus who won the contest, an insult that drove Aías to suicide. The tension is only implicit in *The Iliad*, but the question of who shall be "best of Akhaians" is always in the air.[10]

A candidate who emerges for this title is Diomêdês, the son of Tydeus. He also is omitted by Helen in her survey of Greek heroes and this may be because Homer has promoted this character connected with stories of Thebes in order to delay the inevitable disaster that Akhilleus' anger will bring about. Diomêdês is introduced to us in the fourth book as a young fighter who has yet to prove himself equal to his father, who won glory fighting with the Seven Against Thebes. From his divinely aided successes in Book V until he is wounded in Book XI, Diomêdês, along with Odysseus, provides the iron in the Greek resistance. Homer appears to have modeled Diomêdês as a kind of alter-Akhilleus without

[9] A sensitive explication of the rhetoric of Homer's heroes is Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca, 1989).
[10] This is a major theme of Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*.

his fiery anger. He will come close to sacking Troy itself and will only be stopped when he is shot (in the foot) by Paris.

On the Trojan side, a complex royal genealogy results in the city being called variously Troy, Ilion, and Pergamos. For the Greeks, the story of Troy's fall was focalized through Priam and Paris, the king and his wayward son. Priam was an icon of pitiable reversal of fortune: once extremely prosperous, he lost his city and his line was blotted out. Homer extends great sympathy to Priam, though he also recounts stories about the Trojans that make them out to be congenital deceivers. Priam is the son of Laomédôn, who cheated Poseidon of payment when he built the city's walls. But *The Iliad* traces the fall of the city rather to Paris. Commonly called Aléxandros (possibly as a result of Homer's conflating several legends), Paris enters the poem as rather a dandy and a playboy, striding out before the army in Book III splendidly arrayed. The effect is immediately spoiled when he recoils upon seeing Menelâos like a man stumbling on a snake. He is sometimes capable of fighting like the prince he is, but he never loses sight of his pleasures. Homer will not make him a completely contemptible figure, for that would make the Trojans unworthy opponents. But he makes it clear that Paris falls short of true heroism by bringing him repeatedly into conflict with his brother, Hektor.

Hektor's name may be translated "Holder," and he is Troy's true defender. It is intimated several times in the poem that his death will in effect bring the fall of the city. This adds depth to the poem's decision to close with his funeral, and the laments on this occasion show that Hektor is not only Troy's best fighter but the figure through whom Homer brings out the domestic cost of the war. The most memorable scenes are in Book VI when Hektor converses in turn with his mother Hékabê, his sister-in-law Helen, and his wife Andrómakhê with their son. In these exchanges he shows himself as dutiful, even as he foresees the fall of his city and the enslavement of his wife. Unlike Paris, he is acutely aware of what others, particularly the women of Troy, will say, as when he explains to Andrómakhê that he cannot withdraw to the safety of the city: "Lady, these many things beset my mind / no less than yours. But I should die of shame / before our Trojan men and noblewomen / if like a coward I avoided battle." Hektor will die with the same idea in mind. The traditional background, which told that Hektor's son was flung from the city's walls when Troy was taken, makes more poignant the moment when Hektor takes the boy into his arms and prays that he may outdo his father in heroism.

Notice should also be taken of Sarpédôn, the most conspicuous of Troy's allies. A son of Zeus and a king of Lykia to the south, Sarpédôn has

come to help Hektor, "though I have no least stake in Troy, no booty to lose." His sense of *noblesse oblige* will cost him his life at the hands of Patróklos. Homer makes his death extraordinarily wrenching; Zeus is forced to deliberate whether he will save his own son from death; when he decides not to resist the fates, he rains blood from heaven for the prince who gives, in Book XII, the most articulate expression of the hero's code of honor. Finally, there is Aineías, the survivor. A son of Ankhises and Aphrodité, he belongs to a collateral branch of the royal line. The gods intervene to snatch him from death twice in the poem, once at the hands of Diomédés in Book III and once from Akhilleus in Book XX. As we are told on the second occasion, the reason is that he and his descendants are destined to survive the fall of the city and rule over the Trojans in future generations. It is not clear what Homer meant by this tantalizing fragment of a tradition, but as early as the fourth century B.C. Italian historians decided that this story had to be grafted on to the tale of Romulus and Remus to give their city an ancient and royal origin. The idea that Aineías replanted civilization in the West was already traditional when Virgil took it up in *The Aeneid*, and it remained active as late as Geoffrey of Monmouth, who began his *History of the British Kings* (1138) with the Trojan diaspora and the settling of Albion by Brutus (sounds like "British"), a putative great-grandson of Aineías.

Homer's Way with a Story: The Gods

While it is important to appreciate how much in Homer was traditional, it is equally necessary to realize how flexible these orally transmitted traditions could be. The countless stories Homer's audiences knew came from all over the Greek world and were not consolidated in a single, consistent, and authoritative mythological compendium.[11] Homer not only selects stories but retells them with different details and emphases to suit different contexts. The freedom of the traditional poet can be seen in considering how Homer used the myths of the gods in the poem. For modern readers, the constant interference of the gods may make the heroes seem like puppets on a string. It has been rightly observed that the whole story could be told much as it is without them, but then the Trojan War would not be an affair of the greatest consequence. Homer's divine machinery functions to magnify fully intelligible human

[11] An excellent modern resource is Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, 2 vols. (Baltimore and London, 1993).

decisions and actions until the actors take on the proportions of "heroes" in its archaic Greek sense, men of a vanished earlier age so much greater than ours that they were privileged to mix with the gods and worthy even to fight beside them.

To fill his battlefields with gods, Homer assigns divine protectors to both sides and explains their motives. So Poseidon is hostile to Troy, as he explains in Book VII (452–3), because Laomédôn cheated him and Apollo when they built Troy's walls. And yet, Apollo, far from having a grudge against Troy, is its principal divine support. Homer seems to address this difficulty in Book XXI (441–60) where Poseidon upbraids Apollo for having forgot Laomédôn's insult, and the poet provides a basis on which we might understand their different loyalties by retelling the story differently: now Poseidon says that what Apollo actually did was tend Laomédôn's herds while he built the wall. The patch is not perfect, and we must allow the poet to be a little inconsistent in a long song that was heard rather than read. The overriding consideration appears to be that Troy needs a major champion among the Olympians simply to account for its long resistance, and Apollo is a good candidate because he was thought to have Eastern connections.[12]

Homer is more subtle in using another myth that explained the motives of Troy's principal antagonist, Héra, and why she acts in concord with Athêna and against Aphrodité. This configuration was neatly accounted for by the myth known as the Judgment of Paris. According to the story, Héra, Athêna, and Aphrodité quarreled as to who was the fairest, and presented themselves to Paris for a decision. (The visual possibilities of this scenario have made the Judgment a perennial favorite of painters since the seventh century B.C.). Later elaborations add that each goddess offered the prince her favor in her sphere of influence: Héra promised royal power, Athêna military greatness, and Aphrodité, naturally, the most beautiful woman alive. Paris chose Aphrodité and won Helen, and so started the Trojan War.

Homer's use of this story is striking for his reticence, for it only emerges briefly in the epic's final book. As the gods decide in council that Akhilleus should return Hektor's body, there is dissent:

> "a thought agreeable to all but Héra,
> Poseidon, and the grey-eyed one, Athêna.

[12] On Homer's gods, see in general, Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); and Jasper Griffin's *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), a humane reading of the poem.

> These opposed it, and held out, since Ilion
> and Priam and his people had incurred
> their hatred first, the day Aléxandros
> made his mad choice and piqued two goddesses,
> visitors in his sheepfold: he praised
> a third, who offered ruinous lust."

As the action of the poem is about to be resolved, the poet lines up Troy's main antagonists and explains the so-far unstated cause of the goddesses' enmity. But the Judgment had been subtly present throughout the story, not only in the support that Héra and Athêna give the Greeks in opposition to Aphrodîtê, but very suggestively in an earlier divine council in Book IV. There, Zeus contemplates making peace between the Greeks and Trojans, but Héra and Athêna mutter against it. When Héra speaks out against the plan, Zeus affects to be perplexed:

> "Strange one, how can Priam
> and Priam's sons have hurt you so
> that you are possessed to see the trim stronghold
> of Ilion plundered?
>   Could you breach the gates
> and the great walls yourself and feed on Priam
> with all his sons, and all the other Trojans,
> dished up raw, you might appease this rage!"

The grotesque image suggests that Homer does not dwell on the Judgment because of the disproportion between Héra's epic hatred and its fairy-tale motivation. Perhaps it was for similar reasons that Homer ignored another fantastic tale of origins, the conception of Helen on Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan. But the Judgment is not entirely suppressed: it seems at first to be deliberately hidden, but then, like a truly deep motive, to break into sight at the end. Homer's subtlety seems to have struck Virgil, for he put the story that Homer reserved for the end of his poem right at the beginning of *The Aeneid*. His prologue traces the cause of Aineías' wanderings to the Judgment, "Tell me the causes now, O Muse, how galled / in her divine pride, and how sore at heart / From her old wounds, the queen of gods compelled him" (as Fitzgerald translates it). Yet Virgil cannot refrain from wondering, like Zeus in *Iliad* IV, "Can anger / Black as this prey on the minds of heaven?" Virgil's revision directly reverses Homeric practice, making what comes late come early, as he often does. (*The Aeneid* first tells Homer's *Odyssey* and then

his *Iliad.*) But both poets let us see how a tale of divine vanity can be adapted to divine psychology and even hint at some cruel and inscrutable cosmic design in the world.

Homer's way with myths only carried on the creative processes of Greek mythology itself as it linked stories together. This architectural work can be seen if we pose the next logical question of origins: what was the cause of the Judgment of Paris? It was at a wedding feast to which all the gods had been invited, except, naturally enough, the goddess Strife. Strife had her revenge by tossing into the hall an apple inscribed "to the fairest." It was to decide who deserved this love gift that the three divine claimants repaired to Paris. The old apple story, perhaps, but the exquisite dovetailing that Greek myth can effect emerges, for the wedding in question was that of Thetis to Pêleus, the offspring of whose union was Akhilleus.

Homer continues the cultural work of amalgamating a profusion of myths into a harmony, but the endless interconnections between stories make it hard to snip the threads and say a story starts (or, indeed, ends) at a definite point. One can always go further back: Why would Thetis, a goddess, consent to marry a mortal? Homer is vague, variously saying that Thetis was given to Pêleus by "the gods" (18.84), by Zeus (18.432), and by Héra (24.60). At the same time he seems to have known one popular myth that explained that Zeus conceived a passion for Thetis but had her wed Pêleus because she was fated to bear a son stronger than his father. Her consenting to this union thus saved the king of the gods from being dethroned (always a possibility in the Greek pantheon, where Zeus had overthrown his own father, who had overthrown his father as well). This tale from very early in the Troy story lies outside Homer's purview, but he appears to have remodeled it in the first book when Akhilleus is begging his mother to intervene with Zeus on his behalf: the hero reminds Thetis that she has a claim on Zeus, rehearsing a story of how she had once saved him from a revolt among the gods by enlisting the support of Briareus, "more powerful than the sea-god, his father." We do not hear of this story in other accounts of the career of Zeus, and it seems likely that Homer has improvised it to give weight to a plea that will set the action of *The Iliad* in motion. The story of narrowly averted dynastic threat, the personnel involved, and the ominous phrase "more powerful than his father" suggest that he has used the Marriage of Thetis as a template. Different as it is, the new story draws on implications of the old; it adds cosmological depth to "the will of Zeus" that drives the action of the poem, and it is told in a moment between mother and son that highlights Akhilleus' tragic destiny: he will

indeed excel his father, for no warrior at Troy was greater; but he will assuredly die, and not all his greatness and half-divine descent can fend off the destiny laid on him before his birth.[13]

A final tale, recounted in part by Hesiod but ignored by Homer, explains why the Greeks are at Troy, for no less a reader of *The Iliad* than Pope admitted that "The reader . . . is apt to wonder at the Greeks for endeavouring to recover her at such an expense."[14] This is a folktale of a promise that ends up binding its maker in an unforeseen way. The story of the Oath of the Suitors goes that, when it came time for Helen to marry, her beauty was so compelling that the great princes from all of Greece who had gathered to woo her fell into violent quarrels with one another. Things came to such a pass that her (mortal) father Tyndarus made the suitors swear an oath to defend whoever turned out to be the winner. By this device the wooing was successfully concluded and Meneláos won Helen's hand. But the ironic aftermath is that, when Paris absconded with Helen, the Greek princes were bound to go to Troy by this same oath to defend Helen and her husband. The story reflects some puzzlement as to why the greatest young princes in Greece should have fought so long and so far from home on account of one woman, however beautiful. (The opening chapters of Herodotus' *Histories* reflect with urbane bemusement on these old legendary wars fought over straying women.) Homer neglects the Judgment because he makes very clear from the start that the heroes have chosen to come there for honor.

The Opening of *The Iliad*: The Stakes

The stories canvased above show that Homer had a choice of innumerable starting points for his song, but he decided to set off his story of immense suffering with a small, almost trivial incident. The action begins with Khrysês, a priest of Apollo, appearing at the Greek camp to ransom his daughter Khryséis. They will vanish from the poem after the first book and are, traditionally speaking, nobodies. Khryséis is one of countless captives the Greeks have taken in raids during more than nine years of siege, but she turns out to have been the war-prize claimed by Agamémnon, and Khrysês turns out to have Apollo's ear. So when Agamémnon dismisses

[13] For this reading, see Laura M. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991).

[14] Cited on Book III by E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad, as Told in the Iliad* (Toronto, 1946), an often-recommended basic guide to the poem.

the priest roughly, Apollo visits plague on the Greeks. Eventually, the prophet Kalkhas reveals that Khryséis must be returned to appease Apollo's anger, and here matters get sticky. Agamémnon is willing to return the girl, but he insists he cannot go without a prize. Akhilleus explains that the plunder has already been divided and so he urges Agamémnon to take the long view—he'll be compensated many times over when Troy falls. But Agamémnon refuses and the two leading Akhaians fall to fighting. The opening scene can seem a squalid quarrel between stubborn and short-sighted men. But what is being affirmed and re-created in the collection and awarding of booty is honor.[15] Status in this society must be personally asserted, proved by action, and made manifest in the goods one wins. Because to lose a prize is to lose face, Agamémnon reasserts his position by demanding Akhilleus' prize, "to show you here and now who is the stronger / and make the next man sick at heart—if any / think of claiming equal place with me." So, too, it is the taking of Briséis that makes Akhilleus utter the fateful prayer that Agamémnon "may know his madness, / what he lost when he dishonored me, peerless among Akhaians."

What holds these warriors together is not the Oath of the Suitors; the conflict that opens the poem is political and ethical. According to Nestor, who rises to try to pour oil on troubled waters, it is a standoff between the rights of the army's greatest fighter and those of its supreme leader. The refusal of ransom that opens the poem, then, is a failure of the social order, a breakdown in the conventions that hold the Greek confederacy together. When a small event has great consequences, Greeks knew a god must be the cause, and Apollo has, as it were, turned the exchange of goods and honor into a game of musical chairs. If Akhilleus is to end up without a prize, heroism has lost its justification: "I had / small thanks for fighting . . . The portion's equal / whether a man hangs back or fights his best; the same respect, or lack of it, is given / brave man and coward." Without recognition, he has no reason to stay at Troy: "As for myself, when I came here to fight, / I had no quarrel with Troy or Trojan spearmen: / they never stole my cattle or my horses, never in the black farmland of Phthia / ravaged my crops. / How many miles there are between, / and foaming seas." Like Sarpédon, Akhilleus fights far from home not for vengeance but for honor and for glory, the post-mortem form of honor. When honor is not forthcoming for him, he quits the army.

These weighty and conflicting demands cannot be prudentially resolved because honor is fundamentally tied to a hero's identity, as is made explicit in a speech Sarpédon delivers in Book XII. Sarpédon re-

[15] See further in James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago, 1978).

minds his lieutenant Glaukos that it is their willingness to go into the forefront of battle that makes them honored at home, "with precedence at table, choice of meat, / and brimming cups . . . / like gods at ease in everyone's regard." But the goods themselves are not motive enough, for Sarpêdôn adds:

> "Ah, cousin, could we but survive this war
> to live forever deathless, without age,
> I would not ever go again to battle,
> nor would I send you there for honor's sake.
> But now a thousand shapes of death surround us,
> and no man can escape them, or be safe.
> Let us attack—whether to give some fellow
> glory or to win it from him."

For a hero, the craving for recognition is ultimately an attempt to find compensation for mortality. The only terms on which life is worth living is by venturing it in the struggle for honor and, if need be, exchanging it in a glorious death that becomes a subject of song. The idea is expressed mythically in the special destiny that attends Akhilleus: he can either leave Troy and live a long, uneventful life with his father at home; or he can stay, fight, and die, and thereby win "immortal glory." Akhilleus happens to know this prophecy because his divine mother told him. This makes him more conscious of the price of heroism, but the same choice faces any mortal hero.[16]

From this perspective, the opening quarrel of The Iliad has a larger resonance, for the dishonor of having lost a woman is what the Trojan War is about. Homer is not clear whether Helen went to Troy willingly or not, but the real causus belli is between Paris and Menelaos: what Paris is reviled for is that he was a guest in Menelaos' house when he took Helen; he broke the bonds of hospitality, the sacred obligation of fair dealing between guest and host that was supervised by no less an Olympian than Zeus.[17] Seen as a failure of social exchange, Agamémnon's refusal to return Khryséis in Book I replays the rape of Helen: the loss of a woman dear to the gods brings about an intolerable loss of honor and then great destruction. Agamémnon strikes at the very principles governing this war and making it an affair of honor.

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[16] See Seth L. Schein, The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad (Berkeley, 1985).
[17] On "hospitality" and Homeric society generally, see M. I. Finley, The World of Odysseus, revised edition (New York, 1965).

From this incident the rationale of the war will be increasingly called into question by Akhilleus, most strikingly in the ninth book of The Iliad. This book is filled with the longest and most memorable speeches in the poem, as Odysseus, Aías, and Phoinix (something of a tutor to Akhilleus as a child) argue with the hero to relent and he explains why he will not. Book IX shows Akhilleus repeating the complaints of Book I in a broader perspective and with deeper reservations. Now the entire war is called senseless: "Why must Argives / fight the Trojans? Why did he raise an army / and lead it here? For Helen, was it not? / Are the Atreidai of all mortal men / the only ones who love their wives?" Even more remarkably, the heroic quest for honor has come to seem pointless: "Now I think / no riches can compare with being alive . . . A man may come by cattle and sheep in raids; / tripods he buys, and tawny-headed horses; / but his life's breath cannot be hunted back / or be recaptured once it pass his lips." In his isolation from the warrior band, Akhilleus has come to see that heroic prizes are no compensation for mortality. Agamémnon's gifts are "an honor I can do without. / Honored I think I am in Zeus' justice." Akhilleus does not yet understand what it means to go outside all social forms and seek to stand in "Zeus' justice." Eventually, he will come back to his place in the army and Agamémnon will duly return Briséis with gifts of compensation in Book XIX. But by that point Akhilleus will have lost the life dearest to his own, and he hardly exults in the splendid prizes: "Lord Marshal Agamémnon, make the gifts / if you are keen to—gifts are due; or keep them. / It is for you to say. Let us recover / joy of battle soon, that's all!" Akhilleus will come back to the army, but not on the same terms.

Structure: Anticipation and Delay

After Akhilleus' withdrawal from the army, the essentials of the story could be told in a poem a quarter of the length of The Iliad. The Trojans press on the Greeks until, in Book XI, Akhilleus relents so far as to send Patróklos to appraise the situation. Patróklos meets Nestor who proposes a fatal plan: if Akhilleus is reluctant to fight, let Patróklos persuade him at least to allow him to appear in Akhilleus' armor and fight off the Trojans. This is accomplished in Book XVI: Patróklos leads out Akhilleus' Myrmidon troops and pushes back the Trojans; but he presses his advantage too far and is killed by Hektor. Now Akhilleus rejoins the fight, but with his offended honor transformed into an unappeasable fury for revenge. Even when he hunts Hektor down in Book XXII, his anger

does not abate and he persists, against all standards of civilized warfare, in defiling the corpse. This offends the gods, and in Book XXIV they contrive that Priam should make his way to Akhilleus' tent to ransom the body; there they speak of what each has endured and has yet to endure; Akhilleus returns the body and the poem closes with Hektor's funeral.

So much for the core action, which could have easily been accommodated in one of the shorter Cyclic Epics. But *The Iliad* is several times longer than these, and sheer scale and size are clearly part of its ambition. (Some have speculated that the availability of the alphabet may have enabled the poet to attempt such a monumental work; a blind or simply illiterate singer might have dictated it.) Homer starts the story very quickly—Zeus agrees to help Akhilleus in the first book and he puts his plan into action at the beginning of the second—but then divine and human interference postpone the inevitable working out of his sovereign will. Akhilleus' plea to Zeus in Book I, that he "roll the Akhaians back to the water's edge, / back on their ships with slaughter," is not fulfilled until Book XVI; and by the time Agamémnon makes his formal apology and restitution in XIX, Patróklos' death will have generated a new story that will run its course over five more books before the anger of Akhilleus is fully told.

What makes the long poem an astonishingly well-crafted one is that Homer tells a lot—he exults in giving a detailed description of the new armor Héphaistos made for Akhilleus in Book XVIII, or of the return to normal social rituals in Patróklos' funeral in Book XXIII—but he does not tell everything that he might have told. He leaves for later songs the ironic death of Akhilleus shot in his famous heel by Paris, or the dramatic story of the Trojan Horse. Moreover, what he does tell can be subtly allusive: the apparently diverging lines his story takes often resonate with other stories not explicitly told, and these in turn can resonate with his main themes. This allusive art can be seen enriching a schematic account of the action as it moves forward from the quarrel. In Book II, Zeus sends a deceptive dream to lure Agamémnon into a mass attack. But Agamémnon gets things off course by deciding first to test the troops' morale with a bit of reverse psychology. His suggestion that they might as well give up causes the army to bolt until Odysseus restores order (and gets the plot back onto traditional lines) by recalling a favorable omen the army had received long ago. Nestor then proposes that the Greeks assemble by clan and nation and the poet spends almost three hundred verses cataloging the leaders of the Greek contingents and the number of ships each brought to Troy. (Scholars have duly pored over these verses and can correct Christopher Marlowe: Helen's face launched

exactly 1,186 ships, with Agamémnon's hundred the most.) As Book III opens, the two armies have been brought on stage and the chief Greeks are highlighted in the *teikhoskopia*: we are prepared for a great clash that will make Agamémnon regret the absence of Akhilleus. But before the fighting can start, Paris and Menelâos agree to a winner-take-all duel. A truce is made, the duel begins, and Paris is on the point of being killed when he is snatched away by Aphrodité and Apollo (again putting the story back on traditional lines). Paris is transported to his bedchamber, where Helen is lured by a goddess; she reviles his cowardice but he ends up persuading her to make love. Meanwhile, Menelâos is claiming victory on the field, and in Book IV the gods consider letting the war end on the sworn terms. Héra and Athêna are opposed, and are allowed to contrive it that the truce sworn before the duel will be violated by the Trojan side. Athêna is dispatched to tempt the Trojan ally Pándaros to win glory by shooting an arrow at Menelâos. The treacherous shot finally causes the anticipated mêlée to break out late in Book IV.

All these events have a certain plausibility, even as they show the singer's determination to spin out the action, even teasing the audience by bringing the story to the brink of contradicting what everyone knew about the fall of Troy. But a second look shows that Homer has also shaped these events so as to parallel key moments in the earlier history of the war. The clearest element is the long catalog of Greek ships, which exhibits a geography and personnel that suggest Homer has adapted an older song about how the Greeks set off for Troy. Odysseus cues the allusion when he reminds the troops of the omen they received at Aulis, the mainland Greek city from which the armada had set out. In this way, Homer magnifies the first all-out battle of *The Iliad* by echoing the original marshaling of the expedition. Equally resonant is the duel between Paris and Menelâos. This invention *was* bound to be inconclusive, for both figures were needed later in the saga—Paris must kill Akhilleus, and Menelâos must take Helen home at last. But it allows Homer to bring the war's two primary antagonists face-to-face before the audience. So, too, when Priam looks down from the walls and asks Helen to identify the Greeks ranged before him, the scene would have made perfect sense in a song set early in the war. And when Paris ends up in his bedroom with Helen, what we witness is something like a replay, but with a difference now, of their first lovemaking. A larger framework is provided by the debate on Olympus in Book IV, with Héra and Athêna standing against Troy, as they must have the first time the issue came up in divine councils. So, too, Zeus in effect consents once again to the fall of Troy, even as he teases Héra for being so intent on its de-

struction. Finally, the result of these deliberations is, as it were, to have the Trojans repeat their primary error: the perfidious, bow-bearing for-eigner Pándaros figures as an alter-Paris; in breaking the Zeus-guarded institution of the truce, he reenacts Paris' violation of Zeus' hospitality. The Iliad is introduced as a very limited story from late in the war; but as it plays out it is as though everything were happening for the first time. Or, as if everything that had happened had happened precisely to bring us where the poet wants us to go.

It is clear from the above that a main part of Homer's design has been to tell a massive tale, to expand his main theme, throwing up un-expected diversions, obstacles, and side-stories until his account of "the Anger of Akhilleus" takes on all the weight and scope and dense detail that the word "epic" connotes. Books III–VII will cover one long day of fighting, and Zeus will only banish the interfering deities and send the Trojans success in Book VIII. This sets the stage for the great ninth book, but Greek fortunes have yet to reach their low point. Homer's most prolonged delay, a tour de force that may try the patience of the unprepared reader, is the great day of battle that runs from the begin-ning of Book XI until nearly the middle of Book XVIII.[18] It begins with Zeus stirring up Strife at dawn and it ends with the "reluctant sun" go-ing down after the Greeks have deposited the body of Patróklos on a cot back in Akhilleus' camp. Within this protracted struggle, the turning point appears to have been reached in Book XII, when the leading Greeks—Agamémnon, Meneláos, Odysseus, and Diomédes—have been wounded and Hektor breaks through the wall thrown up to protect the Greek ships and is opposed only by Aías. But Hektor will not lay hands on a ship for four books: Zeus, confident that his plan is well underway, turns his attention to Thrace, and the pro-Greek gods rush back into action. Homer is equally confident that his plan is under way, and has the panache to insert an idyllic comedy of love, the story of Héra's seduction of Zeus in Book XIV. When Hektor at last sets fire to the ships in Book XVI, Patróklos goes into action, and his death at Hektor's hands sets in motion the chain of events that lead to all the other deaths, implicitly in-cluding Akhilleus' and Troy's as well.

[18] Ancient testimony claims that Book X was a later insertion into the poem, and even The Iliad's most fervent admirers will have trouble denying that removing it from the work would increase its dramatic tightness. The nineteenth-century "analytical" tradition of carving The Iliad into originally separate "lays," that were awkwardly combined by "Homer" is now generally regarded as fruitless, but Book X is a reminder that ancient and modern standards of coherence are not always identical.

Resolution and Closure

What lets the anger of Akhilleus come to a close is an act of ransom, as a failed ransom had provoked it.[19] Once Patróklos is dead, Akhilleus spares no suppliant; in Book XXI, he taunts Lykáon, a son of Priam on his knees before him:

"Young fool, don't talk to me of what you'll barter.
In past days, before Patróklos died
I had a mind to spare the Trojans, took them
alive in shoals, and shipped them out abroad.
But now there's not a chance—no man that heaven
puts in my hands will get away from death
here before Ilion."

After killing Lykáon, Akhilleus flings his body into the river.

"Nose down there with the fishes. In cold blood
they'll kiss your wound and nip your blood away.
Your mother cannot put you on your bed
to mourn you, but Skamánder whirling down
will bear you to the sea's broad lap
where any fish that jumps, breaking a wave,
may dart under the dark wind-shivered water
to nibble white fat of Lykáon."

Even the custom of ransoming a warrior's body is refused, and the horror announced in Homer's prologue is realized, "leaving so many dead men—carrion / for dogs and birds." Heroic warfare has descended from a violent but regulated encounter in which bodies and goods are ritually exchanged to mere animal killing. The system of values, shat-tered in Book I, will only be put back together again (mended is too strong a term) at the end, when a ransom long refused is at last accepted by Akhilleus.[20]

The poem's final book opens with the gods' dismay at Akhilleus' des-ecration of Hektor's corpse. It is resolved that Hermês, the god of pas-

[19] Extensive parallels in the structure of The Iliad are highlighted in Cedric Whitman, Homer and the Heroic Tradition (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), an influential humanist read-ing of the work.
[20] See the excellent discussion in Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad.

sage, should bring about a meeting between Akhilleus and Priam so that the body may be bought back. In their colloquy, they recognize the humanity they have in common: Akhilleus looks at the old head and thinks of his own father, whom he will never see now that he has chosen to finish his short, glorious life at Troy; Priam marvels at the young hero's strength, and presses his lips to the hands that have killed so many of his sons. It comes about that it is Akhilleus, who had repudiated every constraint of custom and convention, who urges Priam to stop his unrelenting mourning and partake of food. This moment of communion between "bread-eating mortals" is all the more powerful in that each man is involved with the greatest pain suffered by the other. In duly accepting the ransom, Akhilleus now returns, not to the army and to the social order, but to the harsh justice of mortals under Zeus. Even as he prepares to accept the ransom, he warns Priam to be patient, fearing that his rage may boil up again and he may do violence to a Zeus-protected suppliant. Akhilleus accepts a moment of peace and exchange with Priam, knowing peace will not last long. *The Iliad* does end early in the tale of Troy. There are other deaths, and other funerals, still in store.

The restrained pathos of the final book of *The Iliad* is characteristic of the poem as a whole. It is not a song that gloats over Greek victories and exults over fallen enemies. This is unusual in archaic literature, and suggests one final aspect of epic poetry that seems fundamental to the work. No matter if the soldier be Greek or Trojan, Homer takes it upon himself to give the name of the fallen and often to tell how he fell, and who was left behind in some far-off, horse-pasturing land. One of the most developed and poignant examples is dedicated to a minor Trojan warrior, Simoeísios, who is killed by Aías in Book IV:

"Then Aías Telamónios knocked down
    the son of Anthemíon, Simoeísios,
    in the full bloom of youth. On the slopes of Ida
    descending, by the banks of clear Simóeis,
    his mother had conceived him, while she kept
    a vigil with her parents over flocks;
    he got his name for this. To his dear parents
    he never made a return for all their care,
    but had his life cut short when Aías' shaft
    unmanned him."

To this compact and shapely life story, which flashes out between Aías' first strike and the *coup de grâce*, Homer adds an evocative simile:

"A poplar
    growing in bottom lands, in a great meadow,
    smooth-trunked, high up to its sheath in boughs,
    will fall before the chariot-builder's ax
    of shining iron—timber that he marked
    for warping into chariot tire rims—
    and, seasoning, it lies beside the river.
    So vanquished by the god-reared Aías lay
    Simoeísios Anthémidés."

The simile conveys the hero, named after a river on whose banks he was born, to another river. Something of Simoeísios stays the same in death, and the simile goes on to talk of the fallen tree being transformed by art. One might wonder whether Homer thought that poetry offers some consolation for the loss of life, even as the tree will be shaped and find a new form of life. Yet the tree is transfigured by art to be a vehicle of war, and the many momentary splendors in the poem do not cancel the reality of death; their sheer number militates against this. There is in Homer both a humane sympathy for warriors and a certain "bitterness" about war that Simone Weil named in a famous essay.[21] Perhaps the lesson to be drawn is, as in Akhilleus' final advice to Priam, "do not mourn forever / for your dead son. There is no remedy. / You will not make him stand again. Rather / await some new misfortune to be suffered." What Homer at least can be certain of doing is recalling the names of the dead. The whole passage is rounded off by a repetition of the name of Simoeísios in full flower ("Anthémidés" means "son of bloom"). Epic song, the final and immortal form of glory, is a great thing; but at root its power comes from sheer naming, as Homer gives out again the name the warrior's mother once gave him.[22]

Style and Translation

The problem that confronts translators of Homer is rarely what the Greek means, but rather what to do with his traditional style, in particular with his "formulaic language." Homer's predecessors in hexameter

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[21] Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, translated by Mary McCarthy (Iowa City, 1973).

[22] For Homer's ideas about poetry and its function of preserving fame, see Andrew Ford, *Homer: the Poetry of the Past* (Ithaca, 1992).

song had developed a complete, artificial poetic language, cobbled out of memorable archaisms, metrically useful dialectical forms, and a sort of grammar for generating new "traditional sounding" forms. Homer deploys this language in repeated phrases, lines, and blocks of lines. Something like a third of Homer's diction is formulaic in this sense, and the proportion might well be higher if we had more examples of early oral epic to compare. Much oral poetry, as indeed much popular literature, is formulaic, but the language of early Greek epic is so to a unique degree.[23]

The ways this language works were greatly clarified by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who explained that the traditional phrases aided epic singers in performing long songs orally.[24] The most striking illustration of how Homeric diction worked was Parry's study of the use of fixed, or "ornamental," epithets. Most of the names in Homer and many common nouns have epithets: ships are often "black" or "swift," the sea is "winedark." Parry showed that these noun-epithet combinations worked systematically to provide the poet with a metrically convenient phrase for most parts of a hexameter line; for example, when Akhilleus' name stands at the end of the verse, it will depend on how the first half of that verse is shaped metrically whether the poet calls him "fleet-footed Akhilleus" or "godlike Akhilleus" or "fleet-footed, godlike Akhilleus."

Homer composed in phrases, not word by word. He sought to speak not a personal language but the authoritative speech of the Muses. His style, described as oral by us in view of its functionality, was an idiom for calling forth figures of old, long celebrated in song. The probable effect on auditors was to evoke the essential hero and god as they regularly appeared in tradition, not in one of their momentary actions. But notions of formulas as prefabricated "building blocks" do not tell the full story, for such language can still create nuance. An example is the opening word of the poem, "anger." It has been noted that Homer uses a special, archaic word for anger here, *mênis*. (Some translate "wrath" to connote its archaic severity, and Robert Graves carried this logic to the end in titling his translation "The Wrath of Achilles.") Throughout the poem, *mênis* is only applied to gods and to Akhilleus. In this case it seems Homer, or the tradition, has deliberately limited this word to suggest the superhuman dimension of Akhilleus' anger. The connotation colors the whole poem if we compare the use of *mênis* to describe Demeter's anger at the loss of her daughter Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to*

[23] Mark W. Edwards's *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore and London, 1987) has a valuable discussion of Homer's style.
[24] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

Demeter: Akhilleus' story then seems ultimately to be based on another tale of anger, a cosmic wrath at another rape that explained the annual devastation of the earth we know as the seasons.

Nevertheless, some formulas are used with little apparent relevance; Aphrodítê is a "lover of smiling eyes," even when she has been wounded (5:375), and Akhilleus is "fleet-footed" when he stands or sleeps. And yet, at other times, an epithet seems to be used with special emphasis. A classic case is an epithet for earth in Helen's closing lines in the *teikhoskopia*: having surveyed the Greek heroes, she looks in vain for her two brothers (*The Iliad* 3:243–4):

"So she spoke, but the *life-giving* earth already held her brothers back in Lakedaimôn, the dear land of their fathers."

Ruskin praised the "tender and poignant" irony of Homer's calling the earth "life-giving" in this context. But Parry replied that the epithet is ornamental, being used of the earth also in *The Odyssey* (11:301), and need have no special connotation here.[25]

The problem for translators, then, is to know whether a given word is being used for effect and when it is more generic. Fitzgerald has decided not to make a literal translation and to forego the attempt to repeat in English what the Greek repeats. Instead he interprets each occurrence, as any translator ultimately must. For example, Fitzgerald votes for Ruskin on the passage above when he maternalizes the earth by giving her arms to enfold the dead:

"So Helen wondered. But her brothers lay
  motionless in the arms of life-bestowing earth,
  long dead in the Lakedaimôn of their fathers."

On the other hand, he will gloss epithets when a literal translation might sound slightly inappropriate. So when Akhilleus sulks by his beached ships in Book I, Richmond Lattimore translates closely: "But that other still sat in anger beside his *swift-faring* ships, / Pêleus' son divinely born, Akhilleus *of the swift feet*."[26] One might argue that these very common epithets are deliberately paradoxical in this case, to show how out of

[25] Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, edited by Adam Parry (Oxford, 1971), pp. 125, 129. An argument for Homer's creative use of epithets is Paolo Vivante, *The Epithets in Homer: A Study in Poetic Values* (New Haven, 1982).
[26] *The Iliad*, translated with an introduction by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951).

character it is for Akhilleus to be idle. But Fitzgerald judges incongruity distracting and generalizes the epithets: "the godlike *athlete*, son of Peleus, Prince / Akhilleus waited by his *racing* ships." Fitzgerald is an unobtrusive problem-solver throughout the poem. Sometimes he will render the widely used epithet *dios* on the literal side, as "godlike Akhilleus" (*dios* is connected with the same root as "Zeus"). But sometimes he will judge that "Prince Akhilleus" suits the context better: "prince" is an appropriate interpretation, since Greek aristocratic genealogies often claimed divine ancestors, and it is, importantly, not intrusive. In a similar way Virgil imitated Homer's typical epithets, but prudently selected the widely applicable modifier "pater" for his main character, "father Aineías." On the whole, Fitzgerald seeks, like the poet, not to slow down his account with semantically complex language. Like Homer, he is moderate in his use of metaphor and, in place of lyric speed, aims to reproduce a style that is, to cite Matthew Arnold's oft-approved adjectives, rapid, plain, direct in vocabulary and syntax, and noble.[27]

Those who are familiar with Homer's Greek may prefer translations that try, like Lattimore's, to preserve many of the repeated lines and phrases in its English. Such scholars are actually reading two texts in counterpoint. On its own, a literal rendering (which I have never seen consistently carried out through the whole work) can make an English poem that is more stiff than the original. More generally, Fitzgerald's decision to part with dogged literalness can be justified by the effect he seeks to produce on the reader. We assume that ancient audiences would have been accustomed to Homer's idioms, as modern audiences can follow a complex Shakespearean monologue as it trips off an actor's tongue because they have experience of his rhythms, his range of conceits and figurative language. Homer's audience, too, with much experience of epic song, would have followed along with the rapid narrative, focusing on the scene vividly before them. In other words, curious as Homer's language is when considered linguistically and philologically, as a medium of art it was fluent and comprehensible.

Fitzgerald has succeeded in making *The Iliad* readable, an intelligible drama that moves forward steadily. But he has held back from making it a contemporary one. In his metrics and diction Fitzgerald has decided not to "modernize." This, too, is appropriate, for Homer's poetry always sounded "old" to Greek ears; it was not colloquial, everyday language but formal, stylized speech from first to last.

The Greek hexameter had a long run as the only verse in which to

[27] Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer: A Lecture Given at Oxford* (London, 1862).

compose epic. It was translated into Latin by Ennius (239–169 B.C.), and had become standard by the time of *The Aeneid*. Latin epic kept the hexameter right through the Renaissance. The line is more than a series of six dactyls (‑ ˘ ˘); it is a flexible system of pauses that can be illustrated in the familiar, stress-based version of Longfellow's "Evangeline":

"Thís is the fórest priméval, the múrmering pínes and the hémlocks
Beárded with móss, and in gárments gréen, indistinct in the twilight,
Stánd like Drúids of éld, with vóices sád and prophétic."

The hexameter is a long line with a pause (caesura) near the middle, but avoids breaking precisely in two. The Greek hexameter allowed for dactyls to be replaced by spondees (‑ ‑) (as in Longfellow's "garments" and "Stand like"), making for a flexible line from twelve to seventeen syllables. For closure, the last dactyl is always treated as a spondee, and the final five syllables often make a regular rhythmic phrase (as "pínes and the hémlocks," and "sád and prophétic"). But dactylic hexameters will not do for English translation. Three-beat dactylic feet go against the grain of the predominantly iambo-trochaic (˘ ‑ ‑ . . . .) rhythms of English poetry, and the awkwardness of fighting against this over a long poem is too high a price to pay for an equivalence in syllable counting.

Fitzgerald has fixed on blank verse as his meter. This stichic verse, a single unit repeated row on row, corresponds better to epic hexameters than the rhymed stanzas of lyrics or ballads that were first tried in vernacular epics. The stichic form of English verse that is closest to the hexameter in length and in its affinity for long narratives is the medieval "fourteener," a predominantly iambic (˘ ‑) line broken into phrases of four and three stresses. This is how Chapman translated *The Iliad* (first in 1598), though he turned in his *Odyssey* (1614) to rhymed decasyllabic couplets. English blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter, was developed from Italian models in the sixteenth century and used for epic in Henry Howard's translations from *The Aeneid* of 1539–46. Shakespeare above all made it available for serious dramatic poetry, and Milton canonized unrhymed iambic pentameter for epic in *Paradise Lost*. Pope's *Iliad* has admirers as a monument of English verse and Augustan culture; but the regular march of heroic couplets sounds unlike Homer, and the classicist Richard Bentley was right, if only on this ground, to say, "A very pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you mustn't call it Homer."

Fitzgerald's blank verse seeks to sound traditional, avoiding the freer scansions that unrhymed pentameter took on in the nineteenth century

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when it was adapted for meditative poetry by Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning. Fitzgerald's pentameter is sparing of spondees and trochees (- ˇ), of which he allows rarely more than one in a line; he will invert a verb to keep the straight pentameter: "Now slept the gods and those who fought at Troy." Most lines have, as in the Greek, a medial pause; monotony is avoided by phrasing, especially by breaking up the line internally with a comma or a dash. As in Homer, enjambment is frequent, but a line rarely ends "in mid air." Long periodic sentences can be built up but the overall effect is additive. It is a line made to be intoned slowly, not singsong.

Fitzgerald's stricter blank verse goes back beyond the Romantics, but he does not want to return to Milton's sublime language, which is more Latinate and tinged with Virgilian complexity than Homer's. He achieves this mainly through his diction, which eschews neoclassical Latinity and stays as far as possible near the Germanic, monosyllabic roots of English. (He will prefer "brave" to the Latinate "valiant.") Equally Germanic and archaic is the use of occasional compound coinages to suggest archaism, such as "undergloom" for Hades, or "Thetis . . . rose and broke like mist from the grey inshore sea face." With one purposeful lapse—having the rabble-rouser Thersites complain that Agamémnon always gets "the hottest girls"—Fitzgerald's stark and regular march of solid old words imitates Homer's sustained, dignified tone.

An important by-product of the unflamboyant language is to make the proper names stand out in the line. So in Hékabê's lament for Hektor, the old names, at once archaic and somehow familiar, are the main adornment of the verse: "Achilles captured other sons of mine / in other years, and sold them overseas / to Samos, Imbros, and the smoky island, / Lemnos. That was not his way with you." Fitzgerald's spelling is of a piece with this (and spelling is a part of the poetry). Most mythological dictionaries and classical reference works today follow the convention of transliterating the Greek proper names into the Latin alphabet ("Akhilleus" becomes "Achilles," "Odysseus" becomes "Ulysses," "Héraklês" is "Hercules"). The convention recapitulates the career of the poems themselves, which passed into later European literature via Latin epic traditions. But Fitzgerald keeps the Greek consonants and vowels. In preserving the original sounds he enables the reader to repeat the names aloud. The cumulative effect is to convey, indeed to reenact, one of the wellsprings of epic poetry, the urge to preserve glory by making the names of heroes of old sound again on earth.

—Andrew Ford