Introduction

APPROACHING THE PROBLEM

From both the literary and the sociohistorical viewpoints, the situation of anyone embarking on Homer for the first time—and in many ways this applies as much to the classical student as to anyone else—is a unique one. To begin with, in the sense that we normally consider a written work, there is no anterior background: we are at the beginning. To make matters worse, our ignorance concerning both work and author is abysmal.

We do not know for certain who Homer was, or where he lived, or when he wrote. We cannot be absolutely confident that the same man (if it was a man) wrote both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or even that "wrote" is a correct description of the method of composition involved. Indeed, there is much doubt still as to whether we can talk in terms of a single poet at all, rather than of a traditional sequence of bards fashioning an oral *poème vivant*, a living poem subject to constant modification; though (to complicate matters still further) there is the likelihood (West 2011) of a master poet having used a mass of centuries-old oral lays as material from which to create the masterpieces we possess today. Even the time at which the texts we know were actually written down, and what stage of composition they represent, are equally uncertain. This uncertainty extends to the subject matter. We can no more state for a fact whether a Trojan War actually ever took place, let alone whether it bore any relation to the conflict described in the *Iliad*, than we can form a confident picture of "Homer". All we have, as T. S. Eliot said in a different poetic context, are "hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses."

The plot of the *Iliad* is a good place to begin, since at least we know a reasonable amount about the early myth (itself an ambiguous term) concerning the origin and events of the Trojan War. The first striking fact for any newcomer to the scene is how little of the myth actually takes place within the *Iliad* itself, which covers less than two months—fifty-one days, to be precise—of a war that lasted ten long years, and of which the antecedents looked back almost as far, just as the consequences stretched out a good decade into the future. All that the narrative of the *Iliad* covers are the events precipitated, in the ninth year of the war, by a quarrel between Agamemnōn, commander in chief of the invading Achaian forces, and Achilles, his most brilliant warrior. A Trojan priest of Apollo, Chrysēs, comes to their camp

offering ransom for his daughter Chryseïs, currently a prisoner allotted as booty to Agamemnōn. At first Agamemnōn brusquely—and against general feeling—rejects his offer. Chrysēs prays to Apollo, who visits the Achaian camp with a devastating plague. The Achaian priest Kalchas explains the plague, correctly, as a direct result of Agamemnōn's rejection of Chrysēs' offer. Faced with this, Agamemnōn agrees to return Chryseïs, but insists on being given a replacement by the Achaians: honor and status are involved. A contemptuous speech by Achilles sharpens Agamemnōn's resolve: he threatens to take Achilles' own captive woman, Briseïs, in lieu of the one he is giving up, and in due course does so.

This provokes the almost superhuman wrath (*mēnis*) in Achilles that leads him to withdraw himself and his troops from the war effort, with alarming results for the Achaians. His rage persists, defying all efforts to change his mind (including an offer by Agamemnōn to return Briseïs with additional placatory gifts) until the death in battle, at the hands of the Trojan Hektōr, of Achilles' dear comrade Patroklos, who has borrowed Achilles' own armor for the purpose. This finally brings Achilles back into action, with the sole aim of killing Hektōr—which he duly does, and then savagely maltreats his victim's corpse. Outraged, the gods on Olympos, led by Zeus, compel Achilles to accept ransom from Hektōr's father, the aged king Priam, and to return his body for burial. The sight of Priam stirs unexpected feelings of compassion in Achilles; the *Iliad* ends with Hektōr's funeral rites.

This epic tragedy forms a small part only of a general narrative that was, clearly, familiar in detail to all who heard or, later, read it: casual, and unexplained, references to what follows occur at intervals throughout the text of the *Iliad* that we have today, showing that knowledge of the basic plot line was taken as a given from a very early period during the oral transmission of lays concerning the Trojan War. That plot line, in brief, is as follows.

It begins with the Judgment of Paris, an ahistorical legendary scenario if ever there was one. At the marriage of the Thessalian warrior Pēleus to the sea-nymph Thetis, attended by gods as well as mortals, Eris (Strife personified) mischievously makes trouble between three powerful goddesses, Hērē, Athēnē, and Aphrodītē, by provoking them[1] to quarrel over which of the three has the best claim to beauty. Zeus (who has long coveted Thetis, but is marrying her off to a mortal because of a prophecy that she'll give birth to a man greater than his father) has Hermēs send the contentious trio to Mt.

1. By throwing down before them the famous golden Apple of Discord, inscribed "To the Fairest".

Ida, where Paris Aléxandros—son of King Priam of Troy, but exposed at birth because of a prophecy that he would bring disaster on his city, and brought up by a shepherd family—is tending his flocks. He is to settle their quarrel, and duly does so. Hērē promises him kingship, Athēnē will ensure that he becomes a great warrior, Aphrodītē guarantees his conquest of the world's most beautiful woman. (Why, apart from pure egotism, goddesses should not only accept the verdict of an admittedly good-looking shepherd boy, but offer him bribes for it, is never made entirely clear.) Inevitably, his vote goes to Aphrodītē. By so doing, he makes enemies of two great goddesses. He also, in the long run, provides a *casus belli* for the Trojan War (as Zeus has planned all along, with a view to shrinking the world's excessively large population through slaughter), since when he meets, and falls for, the world's most beautiful woman, Helen, she is already married to King Menelaös of Sparta.

Years pass. Paris Aléxandros is recognized and restored as a prince of Troy. As such, he makes a state visit to the Spartan ménage of Helen and Menelaös, and, aided by Aphrodītē (who has not forgotten her promise), not only bedazzles and sails off with an all-too-willing Helen while Menelaös's guest, but also compounds his alienation of marital affection by removing a sizable haul of family property in addition to the lady, though her nine-year-old daughter Hermionē, a potential embarrassment on the honeymoon, is left behind. They have a following wind, a calm sea, and reach Troy in three days: clearly Aphrodītē, like Artemis, can control the weather for the benefit of her favorites. (An alternative version has a spiteful Hērē, who clearly hasn't forgotten or forgiven the Judgment, hit them with a storm that takes them to Sidon, which Paris Aléxandros duly captures en route to Troy.)

When embassies fail to have Menelaös's wife, and her property, returned, his brother Agamemnōn, "lord of men" (*anax andrōn*), assembles a huge expeditionary force from the various Mycenean kingdoms of Hellas—Argos, Pylos, Tiryns, Orchomenos, and Ithakē among them, in addition to Menelaös's Sparta and Agamemnōn's own stronghold of Mykēnai (Mycenae)—to recover Helen by force, and sack and destroy Troy into the bargain. (These warriors are known in the *Iliad* not as Hellenes, but, more locally, as Achaians, or Danaäns, or Argives.) An omen is interpreted to mean that the war will last ten years. As though to hint that the length of this campaign will be in large part caused by inefficiency, a first expedition fizzles out embarrassingly after the Achaians make landfall at Teuthrania, mistake it for Troy, sack it, and, on discovering their error, sail back home. When assembled a second time, at the port of Aulis, the fleet is initially held up by contrary winds due (as Kalchas

the seer declares) to irritation by the divine huntress Artemis at Agamemnōn, who after shooting a stag boasts that he's an even better hunter than Artemis herself. For expiation of this lèse-majesté, says Kalchas, and to get a favorable wind, Agamemnōn must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. Agamemnōn duly sends for her, under the attractive pretense that she is to marry the Thessalian warlord Achilles—none other than the son of Pēleus and Thetis, who has indeed grown up to be greater than his father: Zeus was well out of that one—and duly sacrifices her, thus making a deadly enemy of Klytaimnēstra his wife. But Artemis's amour propre is placated, and the fleet gets its fair wind for the voyage to Troy.

Since Troy defies all efforts to take it by siege, the Achaians spend literally years raiding the surrounding countryside and reducing lesser cities—what Barry Strauss well describes as "a counterstrategy of slow strangulation" (87). This kind of warfare yields both subsistence to the besiegers and booty for the leading warriors. It is in the ninth year, after the sack of (Cilician) Thēbē (Thebes), that Chryseïs is awarded, in the share-out of the spoils, to Agamemnōn, and the narrative of the *Iliad* begins. It closes with Hektōr's bones collected in a golden box and buried; a great mound is raised, and a funeral feast held. Then the truce expires, and the war goes on.

The Trojans now gain a valuable new ally in the person of the Amazon warrior Penthesilea, a Thracian and daughter of Arēs, who inflicts great slaughter until slain by Achilles. The malcontent Achaian Thersites (earlier whipped by Odysseus for an insulting harangue against Agamemnōn [2.211–77]) now jeers at Achilles for supposedly having fallen in love with her, and Achilles, enraged, kills him. This homicide makes it necessary for Achilles to remove himself temporarily to Lesbos, where he sacrifices to Artemis, Apollo, and Lētō, and is purified of blood-guilt by Odysseus. A second new ally then appears to help the Trojans: Memnōn, son of Eōs, the Dawn, leading a force of Aithiōpians from the East, and wearing armor made for him, like that of Achilles, by the smith-god Hephaistos (who clearly has no hesitation about arming both sides if the client is distinguished enough). Thetis reports on Memnōn to Achilles: in the ensuing battle Memnōn kills Antilochos, but is himself killed by Achilles. His mother Eōs, however, obtains the gift of resurrection and immortality for him from Zeus. Achilles leads a successful charge against the Trojans that would have taken the Achaians into the city and captured it had not Paris Aléxandros, with Apollo's aid, shot him dead at the Skaian Gates, thus fulfilling Hektōr's dying prophecy.

There follows a huge struggle for Achilles' body: finally Aias (better known in his Latinized form as Ajax) manages to heft it up and carry it back to the ships, while Odysseus covers his back and fights off the Trojans. Anti-

lochos is buried; Thetis, her sea nymphs, and the Muses all come to mourn publicly for Achilles. Thetis indeed snatches her son from the pyre and transports him magically to Leukē ("White Island") on the Black Sea. Nevertheless the Achaians build him a great burial mound and hold funeral games in his honor, at which Achilles' arms, the prize for the greatest hero, are competed for by Aias and Odysseus, and awarded (through the intervention of Athēnē on behalf of her favorite) to the latter, thus causing a bitter quarrel that finally leads to Aias's suicide. The Trojan Helenos, captured by Odysseus, prophesies that the taking of Troy will depend on the bringing from Lēmnos of Philoktētēs, an Achaian left there with a malodorous suppurating snakebite years before. Diomēdēs fetches him, and he is healed by the physician Machaōn, after which he fights Paris Aléxandros in single combat and kills him. Menelaös, the cuckolded husband, outrages the corpse, but the Trojans carry it off and give it burial. Helen, in Trojan eyes now a widow, marries Hektōr's brother Deïphobos.[2] Achilles' son Neoptolemos is fetched from Skyros by Odysseus, who presents him with his father's famous arms and armor. The boy is also visited by Achilles' ghost: if to encourage his youthful martial ardor, with remarkable success.

Like father, like son: Neoptolemos goes on a killing spree, his victims including Agēnōr and the newly arrived Eurypylos, son of Tēlephos (who first himself slays Machaōn). But the Trojans, though now closely besieged, are stubbornly holding out. An impatient Athēna has the idea of introducing an attack force into Troy hidden in the famous Wooden Horse (which the Trojans themselves will be tempted to bring into the city) and instructs Epeios (previously only known as a hulking brawny boxer at Patroklos's funeral games [23.665–99]) in the making of it. Meanwhile a second item in Helenos's prophecy is that Troy cannot be taken until the Palladion, a special sacred image of Athēnē kept in the city, is found and removed. Odysseus and Diomēdēs, disguised as beggars, make their way in via a handy sewer, find the image, and duly carry it off—perhaps, as one source suggests, with the connivance of Helen. Newly remarried she may be, but she's a professional survivor: this is not the only instance of her last-minute dithering between Trojans and Achaians. A commando force is concealed in the Horse; the main body

2. Strauss (167) points out that this may well have been a "levirate marriage": that is, one in which, in order to maintain a family alliance and guarantee the widow a male protector, "a brother is required to marry the widow of his deceased brother". Although unknown in Iron Age Greece, the practice was common in the Near East: we have Hebrew, Hittite, and Ugarit evidence for it. By suggesting that the poet is familiar with such alien mores, introducing this foreign custom would also increase the likelihood that the narrative has a historical core.

of the Achaians, after burning their huts and encampment, sail away (but only as far as the nearby island of Tenedos). The Trojans, with stunning credulity, not only think that, after ten long years, their attackers have given up, and that they themselves have won the war, but also—as the result of discussion: at least some of them are suspicious—vote to bring the Horse into the city as a thank-offering to the gods, and even demolish part of their city wall in order to do so. Then they hold a great feast and retire for the night.

The occupants of the Horse emerge, and send a fire signal to Tenedos: the fleet returns, the Achaians pour into Troy, and the slaughter and rapine begin. Neoptolemos kills Priam at the altar of Zeus, hurls Hektōr's baby son Astyanax down from the battlements (another prophecy fulfilled), and claims the Trojan hero's wife Andromachē as his prize. Menelaös finds Helen with Deïphobos, whom he kills, but decides to save Helen when she hopefully bares her breasts to him. Aias son of Oïleus tears Kassandrē from the protection of Athēnē's altar still clutching the goddess's image, and rapes her (this blasphemous act, at least, provokes hostility in his fellow Achaians, who threaten to stone him). The Achaians, after sacking the city, burn it. Neoptolemos cuts the throat of Polyxeinē, another of Priam's daughters, over the tomb of Achilles at the request of his ghost. The spoils are divided, the Achaians sail for home, and Athēna, still outraged by the desecration of her altar, is left planning to destroy them on the high seas. The scene is set for the various Returns (*Nostoi*) of the Achaian heroes, of which by far the most famous is that of Odysseus, recounted at length in the *Odyssey*: it takes him a good ten years—as long as the war he has just fought—to get back to Ithakē.

THE MYTH EXAMINED

The genesis and narrative of the Trojan War as a whole are contained in the so-called Epic Cycle, a group of slightly later (seventh–sixth centuries B.C.E.) poems, surviving only in short fragments and late (fifth century C.E.) plot outlines.[3] *The Cypria* (in eleven books, variously attributed to Stasinos of Cyprus or Hegesias of Salamis) covers the origins of the war (including the Judgment of Paris), the setting up of the Achaian expedition (including the sacrifice of Iphigeneia at Aulis), and the campaign itself up to the beginning of the *Iliad*. In direct continuation after the *Iliad* comes the *Aithiopis*, in five books, attributed to Arktīnos of Mīlētos, which ends with the death and funeral games of Achilles. This is followed by the *Little Iliad*, in four

3. These fragments are now easily accessible in a well-edited new Loeb volume, (Biblio. s.v. West 2003 [A]), from the consultation of which, together with West 2013, anyone interested in the genesis of Greek epic poetry will derive considerable benefit.

books, attributed to Leschēs of Mytilēnē, during which Philoktētēs arrives from Lēmnos and Achilles' son Neoptolemos from Skyros, and the Trojans fatally haul the Wooden Horse (100 × 50 ft., with moving tail, knees, and eyes!) inside their walls. Finally (for our purposes) comes the *Sack of Ilion*, in two books, also by Arktīnos, which describes the deaths of Priam and Astyanax, the burning of Troy, and the departure for home of the Achaians, with Athēnē planning revenge upon them.

There are several points of great interest apparent here. It seems clear that the poems of the Epic Cycle were specifically designed to complete the Trojan War sequence both before and after the *Iliad*, which would presuppose a body of myth that preceded not only the Cycle but also the *Iliad* itself. That assumption is confirmed both by widespread iconographic evidence, mostly on early illustrated vases, and by various brief allusive references in the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example, to the Judgment of Paris, the Wooden Horse, and (almost certainly) the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Further, the comparative length in books of the works that compose the Epic Cycle, and the periods in years covered by each, when set against the *Iliad*—an average of much less than half the number of books, dealing with an enormously greater total time-span—make it very clear that, in striking contrast to Homer, their authors were exclusively occupied with filling in the gaps in a traditional narrative. This is confirmed by Aristotle, who emphasizes in his *Poetics* (1459ab) that a true epic poem should embody, as does the *Iliad*, a unified action, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and not, like a work of history, simply cover an extended period of time, which is clearly what the poems of the Epic Cycle do (Aristotle points out, in furtherance of his argument, how many more plots for tragedies poems such as the *Cypria* or the *Little Iliad* yield than do the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*). Lastly, the respective value placed by the ancient world on the poems of Homer and those of the Epic Cycle is made clear by their relevant degree of survival. The Epic Cycle, except for summaries and a few short quotations, is lost. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, despite their uncertain genesis, have reached us by way of about the best Greek manuscript tradition in existence.

Thus what we have to deal with is, on the face of it, a unique phenomenon. There is no mention, anywhere, of any other poem from this early period in Archaic Greece, lost or surviving, on the vast scale of the two Homeric epics,[4]

4. Creative size seems characteristic of the post-Mycenaean centuries, as though artists of every sort felt somehow emboldened by new horizons, and had fresh confidence in their technical ability to design on an unprecedentedly large scale. The great Geometric Dipylon vases began the trend (cf. Whitman chs. 5 and 11); then came Homeric epic; last of all, in the fifth century, it was the turn of prose, with the structured *Histories* of Herodotos, roughly as long as *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.

the *Iliad* in particular, much less one that at the time enjoyed their equally huge cachet. Modern critics join those of antiquity in praising the *Iliad*'s unparalleled subtlety, depth, overall structure, emotional force, and universal appeal. Two and a half millennia later that appeal has lost none of its pristine force—something we need constantly to bear in mind when probing the poem's genesis. Since it is generally agreed that, in order to produce a poem of the *Iliad*'s unparalleled length (twenty-four books, a total of 15,692 lines) that is also, as critics from Aristotle on have shown, beautifully and subtly constructed,[5] the availability of writing is an absolute necessity, it seems safe enough to date the composition of the poem as we know it to a period after the introduction of an adapted Phoenician/Semitic alphabet to Greece in the late ninth or early eighth century B.C.E. Just how long after remains uncertain and much debated. However, we need to balance this conclusion against the equally certain fact that the main body of the Trojan War myth clearly long preceded the composition of the *Iliad* in its present form, and that the casual references the *Iliad* contains to various key events (e.g., the Judgment of Paris) thus presuppose audiences, then and still earlier, that were comfortably familiar with the myth in its entirety.

But this, of course, takes us back beyond the watershed of the written word, into the final years of a centuries-old tradition of oral poetry, with its bardic singers of tales, its improvised *variatio* of narrative, its formulaic phrases and mnemonics, its emphasis, not only on gods and monsters, but on the great deeds of warriors long dead, its enskyment of heroic fame, *kleos* in Greek—the only claim that evanescent individuals could make to any kind of immortality. How far the tradition went back we can glimpse from the inscribed clay tablets that gave us the Assyrian/Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, prince of Uruk (modern Iraq) in the mid-third millennium (ca. 2600 B.C.E.).[6] As is well known, the *Iliad*, too, contains ample evidence of this long-standing oral tradition. Formulaic titles, epithets, and repetitive phrases abound. Dawn is always rosy-fingered, and Achilles swift-footed. Before a

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5. One nice example of this: in book 1, an old father comes seeking the return of his (living, female) child, and is rebuffed; in book 24, likewise, an old father comes seeking the return of his (male, dead) child, and his request is honored. Such balance is not uncommon and suggests a brilliant creative mind at work on the oral material, rather than a many-handed collective bardic evolution.

6. Some peoples (e.g., the Assyrians and Egyptians) had sophisticated writing long before the Greeks did. That Gilgamesh was the actual, documented, fifth king of Uruk in his dynasty is worth recalling when we are considering the historicity of the Trojan War and its characters: like Achilles, he was said to be the son of a goddess and a mortal father; he fought Humbaba, a Grendel-like monster and made a magical journey to seek immortality and eternal youth at the world's end.

feast the heroes regularly stretch out their hands to the good things set before them, and only move on to other activities when they have satisfied their desire for food and drink. This formulaic phraseology is not as all-pervasive as has sometimes been alleged, but it is very much there, and sometimes can hint at even earlier phenomena that have been lost, but leave a ghost-like presence behind. For instance, the metre of Greek poetry depends on fixed vowel quantities, long or short, with a short vowel immediately preceding two consonants being scanned long (on all this see the section below on *Translation and the Homeric Hexameter*). For long it was a puzzle why certain passages in the Homeric epics seemingly didn't scan right, until the great eighteenth-century scholar Richard Bentley pointed out that in each case a word was involved, such as Agamemnōn's title of *anax*, that had, long before Homer's day, started with a subsequently lost consonant, the digamma, roughly equivalent to initial w-, so that *anax* had originally been the metrically acceptable *wanax*, a point triumphantly confirmed by the decipherment of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets as early Greek.

Thus in one sense the *Iliad* does not stand, unprecedented, at the beginning of European literature as we know it, but comes at the very end (with the appearance in Greece of alphabetic writing) of an age-old oral tradition, of which it displays the unmistakable influence throughout. But this, of course, raises further problems, none of which have as yet been definitively settled, and perhaps they never can be. In particular, does the text as we have it today represent the collective effort, over the long haul, of innumerable anonymous professional bards (known in antiquity as rhapsodes), progressively shaping and refining the myth of the Trojan War; or do we have here the work of a brilliant master poet, cashing in on the huge advantage of the recent advent of alphabetical writing in the Greek world, to correlate traditional lays on a scale never before attempted? And in either case, how far, in the age of writing, may that written text, as first conceived, have been edited, modified, or interpolated before reaching its final form? Certainty, I repeat, is impossible. All I or anyone else can do is to lay out what seems the likeliest case on the evidence available, and what follows represents my own considered view of the case (I find the notion of a master poet highly persuasive). This is not the place for scholarly argument: for those who wish to pursue the enigma further the titles listed in my bibliography offer a useful starting-point.

It is worth noting, to begin with, that no commentator on Homer in antiquity, from Herodotus to Aristotle and beyond, has the slightest doubt that an individual called Homer existed, yet at the same time they make it abundantly clear that they know little or nothing about him. When all

allowances have been made for the Greek literary convention that posited one early originator for practically every creation or custom, it still seems to me extremely probable that the basic reason for this certainty had everything to do then, as it still does today, with the unique quality of the two great epics themselves. To create such works, it was very reasonably assumed, required a genius quite out of the ordinary, and that meant one supremely creative individual (a few critics, in antiquity as later, the so-called *chōrizontes*, lengthened the odds on genius by arguing that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had different authors: some scholars, most notably West, still do).

In any case, for scale, dramatic intensity, and sheer overall brilliance, from the very beginning the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* stood alone and unrivalled. Had they, as is sometimes argued, reached that point by a kind of oral evolution and crystallization (an argument, it's worth noting, advanced more often by analytical scholars than by creative artists),[7] it is curious that not one other epic in the Cycle—not the *Titanomachy*, not the *Cypria*, not, perhaps most strikingly, the *Thebaïd*—was ever mentioned in the same breath as Homer's two epics, or sufficiently highly prized even to survive as they have done. Nor indeed, as Aristotle noted (see above), did the epics of the Cycle have an overriding dramatic theme; rather, they were spread-out historical narratives that recorded a sequence of events, often over many years, instead of focusing on one theme in depth. While both Homer and the Cycle clearly drew on the oral tradition throughout—to what extent we shall see in the next section—the end product, in Homer's case, was something that had never been attempted before, and, it could be argued, was never to be equaled again. The reason for this, it is often (and I think correctly) alleged, is the unique opportunity presented by the second half of the eighth century B.C.E., those transitional years that witnessed the rapid spread of the new Greek alphabet, at a time when the age-old oral tradition of poetry, to which the text of the *Iliad* as we have it bears eloquent witness, had not yet lost its peculiar force.

Herodotus perhaps overestimated (though not by all that much) when he claimed (2.53) that Homer lived some four hundred years before his own

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7. Most notably by the eighteenth-century savant Friedrich Augustus Wolf(see Biblio. s.v.), who claimed that the Homeric epics were not the work of one man but a congeries of folk ballads and folk literature, a patchwork of rhapsodes' lays (eighteen of them in the *Iliad*, according to Karl Lachmann in the *Abhandlungen* of the Berlin Academy, 1837 and 1841). Wolf argued that discrepancies of fact precluded single authorship (had he ever looked at *Don Quixote*?); he believed that alphabetic writing did not exist at the time of the *Iliad*'s composition, and that oral composition on so large a scale was impossible. Time has refuted his beliefs, but his influence on Homeric studies was enormous and long-lasting.

time: the same distance, that is, as between Shakespeare's age and today. Such a date would place him ca. 840 B.C.E. What we know of the diffusion of alphabetic writing in Greece suggests that this is at least half a century too early. But I envisage this mysterious individual at some time after 800—perhaps single-handed, perhaps in collaboration with one of the new scribes—applying himself to the vast and variegated body of traditional oral narrative myth concerning the Trojan War, and seeing its untapped potential for an examination, in depth and at length, of the whole human condition: not only its tragic aspects—Aischylos the tragedian knew what he was talking about when he claimed (Athen. 8.347e) that his plays were merely "slices from the great banquet of Homer"—but its comic or domestic moments, its political and religious contrariness, its passions, hopes, fears, and fleeting pleasures, all it meant to be mortal. I like to think that Homer may have been at some point a hostage (the meaning of *homēros*), and that the author of the *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo* (169–73) may have had good reason to identify "the sweetest of singers" as "a blind man who lives in rocky Chios"; but these are personal fancies and I wouldn't go to the barricades for them.

PRESERVING THE PAST: HISTORY AND THE EPIC TRADITION

In ways the world presented by the *Iliad* and the Epic Cycle is one that we know today. We can visit the sites of Mykēnai (Mycenae), Pylos, and other Bronze Age kingdoms mentioned by Homer. There have been recent queries concerning the whereabouts of Odysseus's Ithakē, but we take it for granted by now that Turkish Hisarlik is almost certainly Homeric Ilion/Troy. The events of the *Iliad* are thus played out on a stage that still exists. This in itself must, perhaps unconsciously, predispose us to accept a tradition that has, especially over the past two centuries, occasioned as much argumentative dissension as is associated with any other work of literature known to me. Though the idea of the Trojan War as entirely a work of inventive imagination is far less widespread than it once was, the degree, and nature, of its historicity remains a highly divisive question. As before, all I can do here is to set out the evidence and present my own opinion. The scholarship is seemingly endless, with no firm and irrefutable conclusions yet discernible.

One clear fact does stand out: to the early critics of antiquity, from Herodotus through Thucydides to Aristotle, the Trojan War, however much Homer might have dramatized his version of it, was an unquestionable historical actuality. So were its participants. When Alexander the Great, at the start of his invasion of Asia, visited, and laid wreaths on, the tombs of Achilles, Aias, and

Protesilaös (the first Greek ashore in the Trojan campaign, and the first casualty), he was not simply cashing in on dubious tourist attractions: he saw no reason not to accept what he was shown as the real thing. As late as the mid-third century B.C.E. we even find a chronological list, the Marmor Parium, which notes events from 1581/0 to 355/4, moving seamlessly and without distinction from "a dispute at Athens between Arēs and Poseidōn", dated 1532/1, to Marathon, Sokratēs, and Sparta's defeat by Thēbai (Thebes) at Leuktra in 371/0. There has been a modern tendency, especially in the late nineteenth century, to attribute a talent for inventive fantasy to Homer (and ancient authors). This is not only anachronistic but badly misunderstands the Homeric zeitgeist, which deemed memorializing the famous deeds of great men (*klea andrōn)* to be an essential (if almost insurmountably difficult) task, whether accomplished by family tradition, genealogies, annalistic memory, or bardic poems. This ineradicable yearning for *kléos aphthiton*, undying fame, not only for oneself but also for others, is, indeed, one of the most fundamental, and persistent, characteristics peculiar to humankind. Yet satisfying it had always been a risky and inefficient business. Until the arrival of alphabetic writing in Greece, oral memory had been the sole guarantee that the past would not be lost; it was only with writing that Herodotus (for example) could take the next step and not only preserve great deeds from oblivion but ask the question that Homer, too, had faced: Why did they fight each other? There was little room in this world, or indeed for long after, for creative minds inventing their own facts: the real ones were all too hard to obtain, let alone keep. It is no accident that we know only of one dramatist in Greece, Agathōn, in a single play, the *Anthos*, who created his own plot and characters *ex nihilo*; or that the novel was by a long way the latest literary form to appear in Greece, where it never got far beyond the fairy-tale romance.

What are envisaged here—and what a gifted poet, with access to the new alphabetic writing, would, at some point after 800 B.C.E., have heard, memorized, and probably have had transcribed—are a number of traditional oral lays dating back to various indeterminate points, some far back in the Bronze Age, some later, that had gone through at least five centuries of oral transmission, including an illiterate dark age for several hundred years following on the destruction of Mycenaean culture. This is exactly the scenario for which the text of the *Iliad* as we have it offers ample evidence throughout. In looking at this evidence, we need to remember—as Carol Thomas and Craig Conant usefully remind us—that "with the drastic lowering of material culture following the Mycenaean collapse, many of the old references would have become at first irrelevant, then anachronistic, and finally incomprehensible" (59). Fluid oral editing would in the course of time replace many key

Bronze Age allusions in all areas with those familiar to Dark Age and, later, early Archaic Age audiences. What survived, as modern scholars have come to recognize, is a confusing and seemingly random amalgam of the cultures of successive ages, including a fair sampling of those crudely persistent archaic beliefs and practices (especially in the area of religion, where they tend to be preserved as sacrosanct eternal truths) that so embarrass a society in the process of acquiring middle-class gentility and elicit a mixture of silent suppression, euphemism, allegory, and direct censorship. The *Iliad* offers quite a few of these, and very interesting they are. Luckily for us, the process of moral repudiation was only just beginning when the poem took its final form, and Homer proved so popular at all levels that direct opposition was replaced by a flourishing industry in ever more fantastic allegorization.

Unlike the self-confident rationalists of the nineteenth century, we at least know today, thanks chiefly to archaeology and linguistics, that Homer's world of Achaians and Trojans was not a mere literary fantasy, but a real Bronze Age historical actuality. From the Linear B records at Pylos, Mykēnai, Knossos and elsewhere we catch a glimpse of a palace bureaucracy at work: professional scribes dealing with the nuts and bolts of a profitable mercantile economy while peasants worked for starvation wages and the unlettered aristocracy pursued military glory on the excuse of defending the civilian population.[8] The actual collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms ca. 1200 B.C.E. would gain an additional explanation were it true that their warlords were all absent fighting a war against Wilusa (the Hittite name for the place the Greeks called Ilion, or Troy). We can see the flow of anachronistic elements in Homer—spears that are the wrong length and shields of the wrong type for the period to which they are assigned; the lump of pig iron given as a prize at Patroklos's funeral games (*Il.* 23.826–35), which, it's said, will last five years for plowshares—which might have been awarded in Homer's own day, but not centuries earlier—as the natural additions made by rhapsodes to bring their tales into line with what a changing audience knew or expected. This kind of thing, worrying perhaps for those seeking Bronze Age authenticity throughout, is exactly what we should expect centuries of oral

8. Surprisingly, some scholars have taken the administrative system revealed by the Linear B tablets as being socially incompatible with the Homeric world of stronghold-based military fiefdoms, and therefore a proof of the latter's unreality. In fact, of course, the world they reveal is exactly parallel to that of mediaeval feudalism, where, similarly, unlettered knights ruled, serfs toiled, and a clerical bureaucracy took care of business. These social distinctions survived: for a well-born warmonger to dirty his hands with trade long remained a class-based taboo in classical Greece.

tradition to accumulate, and no more bothersome than Shakespeare's attribution of clocks to ancient Romans, or the way Quattrocento painters (and others) costume all their ancient figures in contemporary dress.

Thus though modern research has confirmed the existence in the Bronze Age of a world in which Homeric society might have existed, and of long-forgotten warfare around the area of Troy—even of a historical figure, Alaksandu of Wilusa, who may well be identifiable with [Paris] Aléxandros of (W)Ilion[9]—we, not surprisingly considering its genesis, have no more reason than did those nineteenth-century rationalists for connecting the specific conflict described in the *Iliad* with any war or battle revealed in, say, the Hittite royal correspondence with the rulers of Ahhiya or Ahhiyawa, a major power now identified, again with a fair degree of certainty, as Achaia, and located in mainland Greece. As we might expect, the rhapsodes looked back to a real world, an actual society, and sought to preserve the *kleos*, the fame and glory, of these Achaian (or Argive, or Danaän) dynastic warlords who led it. But unless by rare accident, we are no more likely today than those nineteenth-century rationalists were to glean historical facts from what emerged from some five centuries of oral transmission and was then used by Homer and committed to writing.[10].

Nevertheless, the text of the *Iliad* that has come down to us is a wonderful compendium of cultural evidence from all periods of its evolution. Like flies embalmed in amber, details illustrative of past beliefs and practices abound: the transitional period between the collapse of the Bronze Age kingdoms around 1200 and the emergence of early city-state (*polis*) society after the appearance of the new Greek alphabet is especially rewarding. The evidence goes back long before the putative date of the Trojan War: things like Odysseus's boar-tusk helmet and the great, tower-like shield of Aias were obsolete by the fifteenth century B.C.E. Moreover, frescoes datable to ca. 1700 B.C.E. that have been excavated on Thera (Santorini), and were preserved, like Pompeii, by a gigantic volcanic eruption that buried them, could, eerily, be illustrations for the two cities in the *Iliad*, one at war, the other peaceful (18.490–540), depicted on the shield made by Hephaistos for Achilles. Conversely, a good deal of the military equipment and fighting technique in the *Iliad*

9. The first Trojan victim, killed by Achilles, is Kyknos (listed in the *Cypria:* for his supposed prior invulnerability; see Gantz 594). As Strauss (65) points out, his name bears an interesting resemblance to that of a king of Wilusa before Alaksandu, Kukkunni.

10. At *Il*. 16.702–3, for instance, Patroklos is able to scale the angle of Troy's battlements, and excavation has revealed at least one point at which the tilt of the batter wall and the space between the stones would have made this feasible.

belongs to Homer's own day rather than to the Bronze Age, and the use of chariots in battle has largely been forgotten (in Homer they are mostly used to transport their owners to and from the battlefield). But one aspect of Homeric usage is notably accurate: emphatically throughout, weapons are not iron but bronze, and most often simply named by the noun (e.g., 3.292, "the pitiless bronze"), without any cutting or stabbing referent (e.g., knife, spearhead).

More interesting still are the social implications detectable in the text. There are a number of words and phrases indicative of a period before physical actuality was extrapolated into generalized abstractions: *thymos*, *psyche* and *kēr* notable amongst them. Normally the equivalent, respectively, of "spirit", "soul", and "fate", these terms still carry for Homer the physical connotations of "vapor", "breath", and "death-agent".[11] The regular phrase "winged words", which has occasioned much literary debate about its metaphorical significance, is in fact simply another instance of this prehistoric habit of mind: speech was thought of as physical matter, projected through the mouth.[12] Another formulaic phrase, "what's this talk that's escaped the barrier of your teeth" (e.g., at 4.350), makes this very clear.

At the other end of the scale, the social upheavals engendered during the poverty-stricken centuries immediately after the general collapse of the aristocratic Mycenaean dynasties similarly left their unmistakable transitional imprint on the oral epic handed down to Homer. The rabble-rouser Thersites (2.211–77) is the most obvious example of radical hostility to what survives of the ancien régime and its status-based leadership; but he is far from an isolated phenomenon. At the conclusion of Book 9 both Odysseus and Diomēdēs express angry irritation at Achilles' obstinate pursuit of his personal code of honor to the immediate detriment of a war, which, fought the old-fashioned way, has already dragged on for over nine years. Book 10 (whether a late insertion or not) shows the two of them giving a nocturnal demonstration of how to win that war, by ruthlessly abandoning not only the traditional formalities of military engagement, but also any scruples about honor.[13] During their night raid they capture a Trojan spy, scare him

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11. The locus classicus for discussion of this phenomenon is Onians.
12. In his famous travel book *Mani* Patrick Leigh Fermor demonstrates a remarkable affinity for this kind of sensory impression: "I often have the impression, listening to a Greek argument, that I can actually see the words spin from their mouths . . . the perverse triple loop of Xi, the twin concavity of Omega, the bisected almond of Theta, Phi like a circle transfixed by a spear, Psi's curly trident and Gamma's two-pronged fork . . ." (Leigh Fermor 336).
13. Strauss (139–40) similarly points out how the Trojans, too, could have improved their chances by taking to guerilla warfare, and how such a move was hampered by Hektōr likewise being "addicted to a heroic illusion of a decisive victory."

into telling all he knows, and then kill him, despite his offer of ransom. They then, acting on his information, descend on the newly arrived Thracians, murder their king Rhēsos and his chief officers in their sleep, and return to camp with Rhēsos's famous white horses. Ironically, it has been during Achilles' speech finally rejecting the appeal for his return to the fighting that he admits (9.312–45) that he, too, is beginning to have doubts about the efficacy of the whole code of military honor on which he was brought up. Yet in many ways that code survives, most notably as outlined by Sarpēdōn and Glaukos (12.310–28). On the battlefield (6.215–36), Glaukos and Diomēdēs find they are bound by ties of guest-friendship, and they not only renounce fighting each other, but exchange armor; Hektōr and Aias, after a formal dual, similarly exchange gifts (7.287–314).

Breeding and ancestry still count for a very great deal, and the archer is still despised in comparison to the hand-to-hand warrior. But the most remarkable testimony—and undoubtedly the most disconcerting for anyone coming to Homer for the first time—has to be that concerning religious life and the gods.[14] The deities in the *Iliad* have nothing moral about them (as later Greek critics from Xenophanes through Plato to Longinus were the first to complain). They behave, in fact, like members of a large, unruly, and privileged patriarchal family, distinguished from their mortal opposite numbers only in the special powers given them by their immortality. They quarrel, intrigue, are spiteful, bear grudges against one another, and are deeply involved, for the lowest of motives, and seldom on the same side, with the human participants in the Trojan War, even going so far, on occasion, as to participate in the fighting. Since they can ignore, and at times contravene, the forces of nature, their wounds are instantly healable, while their influence on the outcome of the conflict can be huge. Patroklos (16.786–806) and Hektōr (22.273–305) are both fatally weakened, in the first instance, by the malign attentions of a god, which make them easy prey to an attacker. The to-and-fro ebb and surge of battle is regularly determined by Zeus, who can be, and is, influenced one way or the other by both sides' divine backers, but in the last resort has his own plan, as we have seen, for the entire war (to reduce excess population by encouraging general slaughter). The only curb on all this, itself uncertain, is the fixed pattern of an individual's fate, and even here Zeus several times at least claims to consider overriding what's fated, omnipotence and predestination in uneasy conflict.

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14. At the most basic level, in the *Iliad* Trojans and Achaians apparently not only speak the same language (in fact, Trojans probably spoke Luwian), but share the same pantheon of divinities: students I taught sometimes looked at the war in the *Iliad* as a conflict akin to the American Civil War of 1860–65.

Nothing more clearly reveals the survival through oral tradition, into Homer's own day and beyond, of an age-old, bleakly realistic concept of divinity. While highly anthropomorphized—the world of the Olympians comes across in the *Iliad* as a kind of unpredictable, and thus terrifying, parallel universe—these gods are dangerous powers, unknowable, not to be crossed, and amoral in their attitudes. By the sixth century B.C.E., precisely because of Homer's huge popularity and influence, they already aroused strong social objections, as we have seen. The gods' traditional mean pettiness of motive, so integral to the original tale of Troy, clearly bothered Homer himself. There is something splendid about the idea of a war to recover an adulterous queen; but behind this lurk Zeus's plan to start such a war in order to reduce population, and the cases of spiteful divine resentment induced, variously, in Hērē and Athēnē by the Judgment of Paris, and in Poseidōn by the cheating habits of Laomedōn,[15] all of which—the Judgment in particular—are barely mentioned in the *Iliad*, where evolutionary censorship is already evident.[16] Early Greek myth abounded in human sacrifice, but—with the notable exception of twelve Trojan youths sacrificed at Patroklos's funeral (23.175–76)—the *Iliad* avoids direct mention of the practice: even the ritual killing of Iphigeneia at Aulis, a crucial element in the narrative of the Trojan War, gets only one dubious hint, at 1.106–8, when Agamemnōn upbraids Kalchas the seer (who had pronounced the sacrifice necessary) for always being a prophet of doom. There is also the matter of poisoned arrows, habitually used in early myth, presumably in fact and obviously in an earlier version of 4.148–219: what else, originally, would have led Agamemnōn to fear that a mere glancing hit from Pandaros's arrow might kill his brother Menelaös? Why else should Machaön the healer have sucked blood from the scrape? As for Zeus's hesitancy about challenging fate (e.g., over the death of his mortal son Sarpēdōn, at 16.431–57), this too was in tune with the times: divine omnipotence versus predestination was yet another emergent theological problem that was to be argued for centuries.

For modern readers perhaps the most awkward thing about the Olympian pantheon in the *Iliad* is their uncertain transitional status—like some of the poem's archaic terminology—between the physical and the metaphorical. Olympos is both a very real Greek mountain and the celestial home of the gods, but I very much doubt whether in Homer's day anyone would have expected to find the latter at the top of the former. Similarly with encounters between gods and mortals: oral tradition reveals a past

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15. Apollo throughout the *Iliad* is aggressively pro-Trojan, without any reason given.
16. On what follows the locus classicus is G. Murray 129–32.

when this was clearly a commonplace,[17] but by Homer's day such meetings seem, at best, like externalizations of inner impulses (cf. Athēnē, invisible, curbing Achilles' urge to kill Agamemnōn, 1.188–222), and at their awkward worst, when the gods—and goddesses—join in the fighting (e.g., 21.382–518), grotesquely comic. Yet here, too, there are terrifying moments, none worse than the way that Apollo in his invincible, and invisible, power disables Patroklos, slamming him from behind with the flat of one hand, leaving him a stunned and helpless victim, to be finished off by Euphorbos and Hektōr (16.786–92). This is the world that Shakespeare's Lear knew: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport."

TRANSLATION AND THE HOMERIC HEXAMETER

It is over half a century now since Richmond Lattimore first published his deservedly famous, and ground-breaking, translation of the *Iliad*.[18] What made his version truly different from its innumerable predecessors was his determination to get as close as possible, in every respect—metre, rhythm, formulaic phrases, style, and vocabulary, as well as the rapidity, plainness of thought, directness of expression and nobility of concept emphasized by Matthew Arnold in his lectures *On Translating Homer*—to the original Homeric Greek. The stimulus for such an English *Iliad* was, of course, the vast expansion of American university education in the humanities, largely fostered by the GI Bill in the years immediately following World War II; and what it sought to do was to give a totally Greekless readership the closest possible idea of what Homer had been about, metrically, linguistically, and in literary terms. My own version, a generation later, has the same objectives in view, with another one added: the determination, when dealing with a poem so oral in its essence, that what I have written should be naturally declaimable.

At first sight what Lattimore was attempting did not seem innovative: ever since the Renaissance there had been an ongoing battle between modernist and Hellenizing translators, with the modernists generally winning.

17. In his remarkable (and unprovable) exercise in speculation, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, 1977), Julian Jaynes pinpoints Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E. as the point at which communication between gods and mortals via the right hemisphere of the brain began to break down. It was a slow process: Sappho, the seventh century lyric poet from Lesbos, for one, still seems to communicate freely and comfortably with Aphrodītē.

18. Some of what follows here has been adapted from my review-article "Homer Now", published in *The New Republic* 243, no. 10 (June 28, 2012): 36–41, and is used by kind permission.

The essential modernist principle was famously expressed by Dryden, who declared of his version, in relation to the original author's work, that "my own is of a piece with his, and that *if he were living, and an Englishman*, they are such as he would probably have written" (emphasis mine).[19] This formula at once licensed any Anglicization, however inappropriate. It might have been thought that the Hellenizers, whose aim was the preservation of the original characteristics of the Greek, would suit a Greekless audience better; the trouble was that they, like the modernists, assumed, sometimes unconsciously, *an audience that could still read the original Greek*, and thus would be capable of making informed comparisons between text and translation. What Lattimore saw, very clearly, was that communicating the ultra-foreign essence, at every level, of Homer to minds that were virtually tabula rasa where any but English poetry was concerned called for a quite new fidelity—rhythmical and rhetorical no less than idiomatic—to the alien original, together with a comparable avoidance of all those comfortingly familiar, yet wildly misleading, fallbacks (blank verse being the most obvious, and the most misleading) that had served translators so well in the past.

Of all the essential features in this new type of translation—retention of formulaic phrases, syntactical empathy, avoidance of factitious pseudo-similarity to familiar English landmarks—the most difficult by far to achieve has always been an acceptable equivalent to Homer's metrical line, the epic hexameter. At the heart of the matter lies a fundamental difference between Greek and English poetics. In Greek (and Latin) verse, all vowels have a fixed quantity, either long or short. Short quantities can be lengthened by position, that is, by being placed before two or more consonants, which gives a poet more scope; but every metre is determined by an arrangement of vowel quantities. The power of a line is determined by the contrapuntal play of natural stress (*ictus*) against this rigid metrical pattern. In English, on the contrary, vowels have no fixed given length (though diphthongs and naturally long or duplicated vowels—think "chain", "groin", "fame", "teeth", "dice", "home", "dune"—to some extent can be made to follow the classical rule), and in the last resort are stressed solely by the natural syllabic emphases given to any sentence. In the strict sense, English doesn't have metres at all.

In Homer's case the situation is made still more difficult by the fact that the prevalent unit of emphasis ("foot") in the epic hexameter is the dactyl (– u u), one long syllable followed by two shorts, dah-didi. This six-foot line can be set out as follows:—u u |—u u |—|| u u | – || u u |—u u |—u. Any

19. Preface on translation prefixed to the *Second Miscellany* (1685), reprinted in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. G. Saintsbury (Edinburgh, 1885), 12: 281–82.

dactyl (i.e., any of the first five feet, though a resolved fifth foot is rare) is resolvable into one long, dah-dah, forming a spondee (——). The sixth foot is an abbreviated (catalectic) dactyl, shorn of its last syllable (– u). It too can be a spondee (——). The hexameter has a natural mid-break, against the metre, most commonly in the third or fourth foot, as marked (||). To illustrate this line in English, here is a Victorian rendering of *Iliad* 1.44, by C. S. Calverley: "Dark was the | soul of the | god || as he | moved from the | heights of O|lympos." Calverley, a good classicist, knew very well that dactylo-spondaic rhythm runs flat contrary to natural English rhythm, which is essentially iambic (u—) or, in lighter moods, anapestic (u u—), and forms the building blocks of the blank verse line, employed by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and by the vast majority of would-be translators of Homer, even though that about halves the speed of the hexameter, and has totally alien associations to it (translators like Pope compounded this error by choosing the tightly rhymed heroic couplet, since rhyming was unknown to Homer).

Iambs naturally climb uphill, while dactyls are on the gallop: listen to the onomatopoeia Homer works into a line (*Od*. 11.598) describing the rock of Sisyphos obstinately rolling and bouncing down to the plain again: *Autis epeita pedonde kulindeto lâas anaidēs*.

The combination of alien rhythm and absence of stress/metre counterpoint has always made any sustained attempt at an English stress hexameter a lost cause, not least because the English stress pattern tends both to avoid spondaic resolved feet and to coincide exactly with the metrical schema. Calverley, who understood the problem better than most, sensibly gave up when less than halfway through Book 1 of the *Iliad*. Others persisted. H. B. Cotterill's *Odyssey* is typical, its flat dactylic rhythms boringly soporific (*Od*. 6.85–89):

> Now when at last they arrived at the beautiful stream of the river
> Here the perennial basins they found where water abundant
> Welled up brightly enough for the cleansing of dirtiest raiment
> So their mules they unloosened from under the yoke of the wagon,
> Letting them wander at will on the bank of the eddying river.

The problem was a daunting one, and compounded by the fact that most translators, who couldn't care less about the needs of a Greekless general audience, never saw it as a problem at all.

What is still by far the best solution, though by no means a perfect one, was hit on by C. Day Lewis in 1940, when translating Vergil's *Georgics*, and later developed in his version of the *Aeneid* (1952). By a real stroke of luck, this translation was commissioned for broadcasting by the BBC, which meant that it was, precisely, aimed at a nonclassical general public that would,

in the first instance, hear rather than read it. It therefore had perforce to be, like its original, *declaimable*, a quality sadly to seek in most previous versions, but fundamental to all ancient epic. This meant, among other things, capturing something of Vergil's verbal structures and linear rhetoric, which, in turn, demanded a line-by-line adherence to the original text. Thus two crucial necessities were imposed on Day Lewis from the start, and they in turn made him face the dilemma of the English hexameter, one problem of which had always, allegedly, been that it was unmanageably long.[20] What Day Lewis evolved was a variable 6/5 stress line, ranging from 12 to 17 syllables, and (though he did not claim this) largely dactylo-spondaic in its emphases.

The result made for far less boring rhythms, and even for a certain verbal springiness. Amusingly, Day Lewis's declared intention in varying the line's length had been to remove the need, in translation, to either pad or omit, as occasion required:[21] what he created was in fact the nearest thing to a truly contrapuntal stress hexameter we're ever likely to achieve. Lattimore, who had clearly seen the potential of such a line in Day Lewis's Georgics, used it for his *Iliad* (1951), and I explored its potential further in my version of Apollonius Rhodios's *Argonautika* (1997). While taking advantage of its variable length while translating the *Iliad*—as indeed of English natural rhythms, which allowed, very often, for a short syllable before an initial dactyl (which a strict hexameter wouldn't), quietly converting it to u u—that is, an anapest—I was surprised by how often, in fact, the line wrote itself either as a true hexameter or with one syllable short (catalectic) in the final foot:

> The assembly then broke up. The troops now scattered, each man
> off to his own swift ship, their minds on the evening meal
> and the joy of a full night's sleep. But Achilles wept and wept,
> thinking of his dear comrade, so that sleep the all-subduing
> got no hold on him: he kept tossing this way and that,
> missing Patroklos—his manhood, his splendid strength,
> all he'd been through with him, the hardships he'd suffered,
> facing men in battle and the waves of the cruel sea. (24.1–8)

Controlling the hexameter is, in fact, the key to producing a version of Homer that gives one's nonclassical audience some sense of the *Iliad* as a whole poem, and I'm lucky in having had a lifetime of preliminary practice before I finally tackled it.

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20. In fact it was not as long as the clumsy (and rhymed) "fourteener" employed to translate Homer (1598–1616) by the Elizabethan scholar George Chapman, who has always had a good press from literary critics.
21. See his remarks in *The Aeneid of Virgil* (Garden City, NY, 1953), 8–9.

LAST THOUGHTS

This translation, then, aims to introduce Homer's *Iliad*, as far as possible without familiar distracting comparisons or personal additions, to an audience that in essence knows nothing about the poem, its antecedents, or the circumstances of its creation. As far as possible I have done nothing to remove those features—not so many as might be supposed—that are often alleged to militate against modern acceptance. The leading characters, and other entities, all retain their repetitive personal epithets. A reader or listener very soon acclimatizes to these, and comes to appreciate the subtly ironic way in which they are often employed. The formulaic oral phraseology governing familiar activities like eating and drinking is no odder than the *da capo* repetition of a dominant theme in, say, a string quartet:[22] and Homer's own subtle sentence-structure and linear rhetoric are at least as effective as the way translators have chopped and changed his language to make it sound more comfortingly like words written by an English poet.

It is true that sometimes—very seldom, in fact—a point can be reached where, through false associations, close adherence to an idiomatic preference risks sounding ridiculous rather than simply strange or alien,[23] and in such cases I have modified the original, generally with an explanatory note. But for the most part, these men and women created long millennia ago (not to mention their heavily anthropomorphized deities) combine a wholly alien background and ethos with all-too-familiar habits that are endearing or alarming according to circumstance: filial and marital devotion, status-conscious pride and arrogance, ancient long-windedness, the confusion of honor and narcissism, the traumatic effects of overexposure to military combat, obstinacy and recklessness, passion and despair. It is the universalism captured by this extraordinary epic poem that gives it its unparalleled staying power. If its gods offer a disconcerting parallel universe, its extraordinary range of similes continually remind us, in their emphasis on the natural world and an agricultural community about its peaceful business in that

22. Indeed, a similar argument, and comparison, could be made in justification of yet another translation of the *Iliad:* would anyone ever raise serious objections to one more interpretation of J. S. Bach's six unaccompanied suites for cello?

23. A nice instance is the Homeric use (paralleled in Latin) of the human head as a summation, personal no less than physical, of the individual: most famous from the Underworld in the *Odyssey* as the "strengthless heads of the dead" (e.g., at 10.521). At 8.281 Agamemnōn greets Teukros, literally, as "Teukros, dear head": other translators have changed this to "dear heart", and, with some misgivings, so do I. On the other hand at 11.55, Zeus sends down bloody rain as "a sign of all the brave heads he'd soon dispatch to Hādēs", and here I've kept the original: the grey area between alien and ridiculous is exceedingly narrow.

world, of the exorbitant price that its aristocracy forces that community to pay in its pursuit of retribution and, even more insidiously because so often unprovoked, of everlasting fame.

As Richard Martin points out, in a penetrating discussion in his Introduction to Lattimore's *Iliad*, this is a work that, above all, provokes questions with uncertain answers:

> Is the *Iliad* a celebration of heroism or an interrogation of its basic—potentially flawed—assumptions? Whom should we emulate, if anyone, in this somber depiction of men and women under extreme conditions? Is it an elegy for a lost golden age, when people lived more out-sized and exciting lives? Or is it a warning about the catastrophes such lives engender? Is it a poem meant to shore up the ideological underpinnings of a fading aristocracy of self-centered warlords? Or does it capture the first glimmerings of a communal consciousness of the type that emerged in increasingly democratic (or at least nonelite) institutions within the city-state?[24]

For me, the poem's greatness is evident in the fact that it is at one and the same time all of these things, and not only because it is the product of a culture in rapid transition between the oral and the written, between historical myth and history, between the memory of the old Mycenaean aristocratic warrior-kings (whose proud and enigmatic gold funeral masks still survive) and the emerging soldier-farmers of the city-state and the hoplite phalanx. The *Iliad*'s extraordinary humanity can contain them all, virtues and vices alike. We understand what instincts drive the heroic Achilles, but Thersites the radical demagogue gets his moment, too. That is why, as Martin reminds us, our "experience of the *Iliad* also becomes one of self-exploration and self-definition." In our less ambitious way we are like Aeschylus, feeding at Homer's great banquet, each generation finding what best answers to its needs.

One last word. It will be noticed that I have made virtually no attempt to dictate the literary terms in which anyone new to the *Iliad* should seek to appreciate it as a poem. This is partly because, just as no two historians can fully agree on the poem's genesis, so no two critics are in complete concordance when delineating its literary qualities. But first and foremost, it is because a lifetime devoted to teaching of one sort or another has shown me that initial impressions are crucial, and that if these are imposed externally, they can never be shaken off. First-time readers of the *Iliad* should be

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24. Lattimore 52–53.

allowed to establish their own personal impression of it before listening to the competing chorus of professionals, who are all too ready to shape their opinions for them. My bibliography offers a way into this noisy marketplace. Take my advice and don't consult the market until you've familiarized yourself with the great poem itself, preferably on more than one reading.