

ACCOUNTING FOR THE TITLE

Homeric questions and answers

Moments and events

Clues and evidence

Delight and death

Reading and interpretation

Odyssey and *Iliad*

READING HOMER'S POEMS is one of the purest, most inexhaustible pleasures life has to offer—a secret somewhat too well kept in our time. The aim of this book is to tell anyone who might care—first-time, second-time, or third-time readers or people who have not yet laid eyes on the epics—some of the causes and details of that delight.

Why do these details need telling? There are two reasons, one happier than the other. The happier one is that readers like me, who have read Homer and talked about the poems with students and other friends and made hundreds of mental and marginal notes, are naturally bursting with discoveries which it is much less painful to communicate to the world than to hold in. The second reason is that, apart from the sad fact that there are certain prejudices abroad these days against old and great books—those “classics”—just because they are old and great, the approaches that are intended to introduce us to

them are sometimes really derailments that deflect our attention from the poems themselves.

The title of this book is meant to announce the keywords for the notions that I want to put in service for Homer. This foreword will therefore be an amplification of the title; readers wanting to get on with it may wish to skip the whole thing and go to any one of the forty-eight little chapters that arouses their interest. For those readers, let me say upfront what my main notion is.

It is that there are two *Odysseys*: *Odyssey* straight and *Odyssey* cunning. The straight *Odyssey* is full of memorable incident and captivating beauty, but the cunning *Odyssey* is, once you've caught on, the marvel of the ages in its artfulness. Since the Homeric epics have in fact been the marvel of the ages, I am certain that other readers have always known, or at least sensed, the myriad of small revelations I am about to relate, though these readers—early on they were hearers—may not have been the type to make a book of their insights. Consequently, it would perfectly suit my hopes for this book if readers were to poke around in it to find encouragement and corroboration of their own wild surmises.

HOMERIC QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

We are blessed in knowing almost nothing about the poet called Homer—blessed because we may concentrate on his poetry without distracting ourselves with information the poet himself did not think was relevant to the world he made for us. I would not want to claim that knowing things is not, on the whole, good—on the contrary, I will be implying continually that our whole experience is to be brought to bear on reading the epics—but to serve a good purpose, extraneous information always requires the graceful art of timely forgetting.

The sum of things unknown about Homer is called “the Homeric question.” We do not know for sure when Homer lived, or if the name belongs to one man or if each of the two Homeric epics had its own Homer; in antiquity those who believed the latter were called the “Separators.” Nor do we know whether each of the epics was composed—it is not known whether in oral or written form—by one poet or whether it was put together by a last collator out of many then current stories or lays; those who believed the latter were called in modern times the “Aggregationists.” In fact we have no direct evidence that the author of the *Odyssey*, at least, was a man at all. Samuel Butler claimed in *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), a book which is as perceptive in its reading of the poem as it is ridiculous in its conclusion, that the poet was Nausicaa, the young princess of the Phaeacian fairyland, who is unlike all Odysseus’ other women in being just short of womanhood in age and like them in being very keen witted. This claim is like saying that that apotheosis of girlhood, Countess Natasha Rostov, is the authoress of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* because this novel, the modern counterpart of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* together, displays a “womanly instinct” in its apprehension of men.

The ancients thought that the war which is the setting, if not the subject, of the *Iliad* ended in 1184 B.C. with the sack of Ilium-Troy and that Homer composed his poems in the ninth or eighth century; moderns put him as late as 700 B.C. In the latter case, since a Greek adaptation of the Semitic alphabet was then coming into use, the poems might have been written down by their poet. In any case, the epics were completed when their events were distant memories, insofar as they were facts at all.

Homer—we do not know if “Homer,” which means “Hostage” or “Pledge,” was a nickname, and if so, for what he was hostage or to whom he was pledged—may have been born in

Ionia, on the coast of Asia Minor, though in antiquity seven cities claimed him. He was always said to have been blind, an apprehension I will make the most of below (19).*

The reading of the Homeric epics presented in the forty-eight chapters of this book is not helped much by the two and a half thousand years of ingenious speculation on the Homeric question, but it might, quite incidentally, add one more opinion to them. Besides eliciting the significance of Homer's blindness, I will work on the hypothesis that the two epics taken together are tightly complementary and that taken separately each is an intricately tight-woven whole—and this surmise will be fruitful. At a time when the Separators and Aggregators were passionately at work, Goethe wrote a poem equally passionate (though of no great lyrical beauty) called "Homer Against Homer," in which he rebels against the acute-mindedness of those "who liberated us from all reverence / So that we affirmed far too freely / That the *Iliad* is only a patchwork." This present reading is not liberated from all reverence.

Whoever Homer was, we may confidently say this of him: He was not a literary man. He had, I think, never read a book about books, if he ever read a book at all. But he did, evidently, have a long poetic tradition behind him, a tradition largely lost, of lays, legends, folktales, war stories, together with a poetic diction and a prosody, that is, a metric system. It was the heroic hexameter, a line unvaryingly of six feet, composed basically of dactyls, a metrical foot named from *dāktȳlōs*, "finger." For each of them, another type of foot, a spondee (- -) might be substituted; the term signifies a libationary foot, because at libations slow solemn rhythms were in order. The last foot was a spondee or a trochee (- ^), the "running" foot. Modern readers will take the longs as *stressed*, the shorts as

* Numbers in parentheses refer to chapters in the text.

more tripping; in ancient Greek, longs actually had a *duration* double of shorts. Here is the first line of the *Odyssey*:

Ān- drā mōi | ēn- nē- pē, | Mōu- sā, pō- | l̄y- trō- pōn | hōs mā- lā | pōl- lā.

It is a regular heroic line, in which the fifth foot is normally a dactyl. To have a spondee there indicates some sort of solemn havoc; it is a metric subtlety Homer uses with impressive effect. For example, the *Odyssey* has a villainous, draft-dodging antihero, Aegisthus, who conspires with his mistress, Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, to murder the returning commander in chief of the Trojan expedition. This deed dominates the consciousness of all the "Returns." (The word is capitalized because it is almost a technical term in the *Odyssey* (15).) Hear how heavilyheartedly proceeds and ends the line that, early on, concludes the introduction of his baneful name:

hōs ē- phāth' | Hēr- mēt- | ās āll' | ōu phrē- nās | Āt- gī- | sthōt- ō.

The lines preceding are also heavily spondaic, but none as discombobulatingly so as the ones whose fifth foot is, against ordinary usage, a spondee.

A long oral tradition of hexametric recital would surely prepare a professional poet for wielding a standard line with so much flexibility, and so would the memory training required to hold in mind the twenty-seven thousand eight hundred and two lines of the two epics, later on divided into twenty-four books each. And hold them in mind he did, both he and his audience, for his control of significant detail over thousands of lines is demonstrable (10, 12, 14, 18, 19, 25, 36, 48). In his Latin poem "On the Poetic Art" Horace says in humorously awed censoriousness: "I feel indignant when good Homer nods / But truly in so long a work it is permissible for sleep to

creep in.” I too am the proud discoverer of more than one such lapse. For example, when Aeneas and Achilles do battle Achilles sends his spear right through Aeneas’ shield, which he is holding over his head, so that it fixes itself in the ground behind him; some fifty lines on, a rescuing god draws that same spear out of that same shield. So what?

Homer, then, used the not-so-raw materials of his tradition as Shakespeare used the *Chronicle* of Hollingshed for his history plays and Bach the chorales of his church for his Passions and cantatas, and with these they all worked a sea change into something rich and strange.

But while Homer did not have a literary, that is a written, tradition behind him, he most certainly had one ahead of him, since he himself became the source of literature. For if there actually is a something to be called “literature,” aside from a catalogue of belles-lettres, it must manifest itself as a cohesive texture of influences on a literate reader and writer, and there Homer is first in time, first in enduring effect, first in breadth of use, first in force of inspiration. Think not only of Latin and English epic: Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which is at once the continuation and the rival of the Homeric epics, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which appropriates Homeric heroes to populate Hell. Think also of the multitude of lyric poems—some of which will be called in as aids to interpretation in this book—and of all the stories abstracted from Homer’s poetry and absorbed even now as “myth” in prose and pictures. As Whitehead said that all philosophy was a footnote to Plato, so we might say that all Western literature is a footnote to Homer—literature, that is, insofar as it is indeed a tradition.

Homer, then, is first to us, though he was not first to himself. That is the way great traditions seem to work: They are not just smoothly continuous manifestations of excellence but include sudden irruptions of truly miraculous moments which, eclipsing what is behind them, seem like abrupt beginnings.

Thus those wonders of frieze painting found in the caverns of Lascaux were preceded by gifted Neolithic paintings twice their age but nonetheless seem to their modern viewers like primarily ultimate exemplars of visual representation, which in their subtle exploitation of the billowing cave walls, the unhesitating perfection of their line, the sophistication of their coloration, the grandeur of their composition, and the sheer “thereness” of their animal figures seem at once the unsurpassable finale and the very beginning of the art of painting. My mind ran to the Rotunda of the Aurochs at Lascaux because the poet Homer seems to me to have had a painter’s vision not dissimilar in the sheer presence of his epic shapes (19). But my main point is that Homer seems to be such a sudden peak in the high country of human artistry, one whose poetry rises from the roots provided by nameless poets before him and whose poems are themselves the quarry of all the authored literature thereafter.

I shall, consequently, take “Homer” as the name of the one poet (or of two who were each other’s alter ego) who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This point is worth making because it entitles me to suppose that behind the epics there is *one* poetic intention and that clues found far apart in the forty-eight books of both epics were put there by one author, the responsible progenitor, who had in his mind what we may notice. Thus *we* may ask what *he* intended, an approach disallowed by some theorists of literature. But here it will be adopted.

MOMENTS AND EVENTS

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both extended narratives, long-breathed relations. The *Odyssey* particularly tells of ten years of time passing. We might even say that time passing and how

things come to pass in time are its narrative form insofar as Homer makes carefully intricate compositions of temporal sequences and parallelisms (5, 25, 36, 47). So why speak of Homeric *moments*?

I think that Homer's alleged blindness betokens the extraordinary visual acuity of his poetry, the sharply detailed inner visions he constructs for us in words. Such sights of the imagination tend toward a kind of vivid momentariness, a pregnant momentousness. Much later Aristotle will bring into use a word very familiar to us in its modern adaptations: *energeia*, often translated "activity." For us energy is the capacity for being actively at work, but *energeia* is the fulfillment itself of that capacity, expressed not in locomotion but as a kind of vibrant stasis, when any being is fully at work just being itself, being what it was meant to be.

Into the dynamic, temporally flowing narrative of the epics are set these stations of activity, when the tale comes to its fulfillment in a high point, a moment of summary significance. These moments are often primarily visual, in the sense that the words set the scene, and we are responsible for turning their indications and intimations into the picture that shows the meaning. For example, Homer leads us into the scene where Penelope and Odysseus, faithful wife and returning husband, sit face-to-face in private over their own hearth for the first time in twenty years. The manner and mode of their mutual acknowledgment remains unsaid, by them or by Homer, but it is nonetheless *shown* (45), for it is a remarkable fact (and one of the ultimate mysteries of human nature) that words spoken over many passages can converge to concreteness in an internal picture that carries conviction.

Homer, we might say, is self-illustrating. Perhaps it is not altogether mannerly to fix on his high moments—a little like picking the raisins you like out of a cake or the eight measures

that ravish you out of a cello sonata. But in truth, these moments are so artfully enmeshed in the surrounding narrative, which leads up to them by hints and then slopes away from them laden with meaning, that attention to them is not really sensation hunting; in any case, they are, intentionally, the foci of this book. Incidentally, not every visual effect is narratively revealing; Homer delights in painting for our simple delectation sharply molded, detailed landscapes and artifacts (18).

And, of course, there are many such moments, when time stops and something becomes manifest, which are purely verbal, when we are meant to hear an arresting, even heart-stopping word-sound. For example, when Achilles mourns his dearest friend, Patroclus, whom he has sent into battle as his surrogate, he cries out: "I have lost him." But the Greek word for "lost" can also be heard thus: "I have *destroyed* him," and as in one of those optical illusions where a figure suddenly shifts meaning, the *Iliad* suddenly emits a more flickering, somber light (10, 26).*

This is the time to reveal a—poorly—hidden agenda of this book: to snaffle at least a few readers into learning Greek. What else, after all, is so important, once livelihood is assured and the family launched and leisure left over? For reading Homer, happily not much is needed. Truth to tell, most of us who learned Greek in college can't really sight-read very competently, so that running over a dozen lines of hexameter is like a toboggan ride: down the chute and you are lucky if you aren't spilled onto the icy bank and arrive at the bottom with only one loosely dragging accusative. But the rush is marvelous, and the rewards of slow reading, of enforced attention to formal detail, helped by any one of the unceasing stream of

* All translations of the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and all other works are mine, except where noted. Sometimes I have translated the same line in different ways to bring out particular meanings.

fine translations, each of which preserves different features of the original, are really great.* I will not hesitate to draw the reader's attention to Homer's Greek when he does something wonderful with it, but always in transliteration and with a translation.

It hardly needs saying that, the word "moment" having numerous significations, I'll be using it for Homeric moments other than those just delineated, such as "in Homer's epics even the most minor characters have their moments of distinction" or "the levity of the Homeric gods is of great moment to the gravity of men."

CLUES AND EVIDENCE

From the fact that there is a unifying intelligence of enormous memorial capacity informing the poems comes a certain confident alertness to clues and cues: clues that lead to the story behind the story, cues that signal some strange business about to go on.

There is a convenient notion going around that an ingenious professional reader may say almost anything, may play any half-plausible riff off the text, improvise brilliantly way beyond the poet's provable intention, because that text has in fact floated free of its maker and an authorial intention is indiscernible in principle. The Greek word for a "maker" is *poietes*, and what is being denied in this postmodern mode is that poems are by poets. The gist of my approach will be as follows:

* There is something to be said for learning Greek quite apart from the reading of authors. My father, a physician who was educated in a German classical gymnasium, cherished the following story: His Greek professor, bidding goodbye to a student being withdrawn by his father for a business apprenticeship, was heard to say sorrowfully: "What a pity he couldn't stay for the irregular verbs! One more month and he'd have had something to sustain him in life."

While the poet's specific personal circumstances are neither here nor there, it is a reasonable faith that there is a responsible author, a maker, who leaves an inexhaustible wealth of intentional small signs *meant* to be picked up by any reader as evidence *from* the lines of what is being said *beyond* and between the lines. These intimating clues take the form not only of metric anomalies, signifying visualizations, and double meanings already exemplified, but also of apparently misapplied epithets (21), homonyms, that is, words having the same sound but different meanings (35), suggestive descriptions (24), and dozens of other devices, but, above all, of pregnant silences and significant omissions. For example, never till the very end of the *Odyssey* is a fact explicitly mentioned that casts a darkish light over Odysseus' Return: that the wooers who are beleaguering his son and wife are the children of a generation of Ithacans whom Odysseus has deployed into oblivion (26, 43).

My reverent faith in the poet Homer is not, I hasten to say, some antecedent stance or, God forbid, a literary theory. It is rather a consequence of reading the poems, sprung from the fact that there seems to be no end of telling particulars that ask to be listened to, that the text seems to be teeming with yet more indices at every fresh reading, so that an ardent and trusting attention to this poet of poets is continually rewarded, and discoveries seem minimally subjective and even demonstrable. Let me put it this way: If I were, by a fate beyond my deserts, translated to the Elysian Fields, there to be admitted to conversation with the Immortals (as Plato's Socrates hoped to be and Swift's Gulliver in fact was), and if I there heard Homer discourse so as to show him a simpler man than I thought and my readings to be mere inventions, I would be not only sadly deflated but *very* surprised.

It is, then, my sense of Homer's inexhaustibility that encourages me to take up once again preoccupations that have

filled libraries with books for ages and filing cabinets with articles for centuries, and to find the thought of all that unread material not burdensome but buoyant. It bears saying twice, too, that I cannot believe that the discoveries made explicit here haven't been apprehended implicitly by Homer lovers through the millennia and that many others haven't been captivated by the sense that there is more going on than meets the word-reading eye.

The evidence being in the lines, the references for each claim are given at the end of the book for the suspicious to check out and the persuaded to follow up—for, of course, I am anxious for these pages to lead their readers back to Homer's poems.

DELIGHT AND DEATH

In mathematics a postulate is a proposition the student is asked to agree with whether or not it seems quite self-evident—else nothing can go forward. Let me say then that the possibility of pleasure to be gotten from reading the epics is my second postulate (the first being the requirement of attentive trust in the text). I want to call the pleasure peculiar to reading Homer “delight.” Candor requires me to admit that it is with the reading of Homer as with all the other self-endorsing pleasures of life—those, that is, in which genuine enjoyment is attended by a sense of self-approval: we do not do most incessantly what we are most pleased with ourselves for being pleased by, and many easier books get read before Homer is taken up once again—but then always with an acute sense of homecoming.

Nevertheless this epic pleasure, like tragic pleasure, poses a problem—a problem felt, I think, by all readers who really give themselves over to the experience. The *Iliad* is a book of

battles; long stretches in its early, middle, and final phases consist of nothing but one death or wounding, one pitiless killing and graphic piercing of eye, gullet, chest, and bowel after the other. And there are deaths out of battle, like the sacrificial manslaughter of the twelve Trojan boys by an Achilles beside himself with raging grief for his dead friend Patroclus.

Homer, to be sure, does everything a poet can do to make these horrors palatable. The surfeit of killing is perhaps mitigated by the fact that each recital is a remembrance: that this dead warrior has his name, ancestry, place of origin, and manner of armament forever set in the greatest of all war poems, which is thus also a tremendous war memorial. There are few mass carnages; most battles are single combat in which two “forefighters” (*promachoi*), often nobodies never heard of before or after, emerge from the troops, sometimes racing forward on chariots, and stand forth, like sudden coagulations of warriorhood, briefly here and now:

And, as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothings
 A local habitation and a name.

The most beautiful similes are, moreover, reserved for this deadly combat—and the most poignant ones. There is, for example, one Gorgythion, an undistinguished youngster, a side-son of Priam, King of Troy, who is hit in the chest by an arrow meant for Hector, Priam's best son:

And like a poppy he let fall his head to one side, a poppy that
 is in a garden,
 Laden with fruit and the showers of spring,
 So he bowed to one side his head made heavy with helmet.

Behind almost every battle or casualty Homer puts a relieving picture of peace or nature (20).

It helps, but not enough. To attend to all the gore is gruesome, but not to attend puts the reader in the false situation of being bored by fatalities. Aristotle, a keen literary critic, says outright that the *Iliad* is simple and concerns suffering, while the *Odyssey* is complex and concerns character, and that is certainly a summary of the reasons this book is more about the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*.

But the *Odyssey* too has its share of brutality that casts a grimly dark light on its perpetrators. Its first ending—like a Beethoven symphony this poem has concluding climax upon concluding climax (14)—relates the great, unforgiving slaughter of Penelope’s wooers and the mass hanging of the faithless serving women. Before that dozens of sailors are eaten by monsters and swallowed by the sea. And although these deaths are perhaps not meant to have much gravity, there is no evading the fact that what would be plain bad in life—to hear of death nonchalantly or with pleasure—falls under the postulate of pleasure in reading epic. I think that fact can cease to be a perplexity only when poetry ceases to be wholeheartedly experienced. So when in Plato’s *Republic* Socrates bans the poets, and Homer in particular, from his political community for making what ought to be excruciating to an audience pleasant to it, he does so not because he is deaf to poetry but because he is alive to it. He is only facing squarely *the* ethical problem of the arts: the surreptitious pleasure of representational excruciation, the inherent sadism of esthetic contemplation.

It does not really resolve the perplexity—it only states it—to say that while it is the part of a citizen of life to intervene by action, it belongs to a reader of fiction to be a very attentive bystander; that dictum just defines what is called the “es-

thetic pleasure,” the pleasure that is the problem. There are, however, different kinds of esthetic pleasure. In the broadest sense it is the encompassing delight in imitation itself: “For we delight in contemplating accurate images of disgusting beasts and corpses, which are themselves painful to see,” says Aristotle. He explains the reason—there is pleasure, the pleasure of learning, just in recognizing a likeness: I *know* the man Odysseus. It may be a true but it is also a dangerous doctrine that every decoding of a representation is a learning experience: it gives license to every kind of image viewing. Special among the pleasures of imitation watching is the “tragic pleasure” which Aristotle is deeply interested in delineating; it is that famous “purification of affections through pity and fear.”

This exoneration of esthetic pleasure as a kind of learning, and of tragic pleasure in particular as a kind of cleansing of the passions, is an answer to Socrates who thinks that, on the contrary, by such engagement with imitations our passions are excited to excess, and we are incited to passionate conduct. Homer is for Socrates, who has from childhood on loved and revered him, “the leader (*hegemon*) of all those beautiful tragedians” and so to be regarded as responsible for the tragic dramas that put before us living imitations of terrifying events. And in fact, the epics contain within themselves all the chief tragic plots; for example, of Oedipus who married his mother, of Ajax who committed suicide (6), and above all, of Agamemnon whose murder (or execution) by his wife, Clytemnestra, looms behind the *Odyssey*; the epics are the treasure house of tragic myth (32).

Aristotle tacitly protests this lumping together of tragic and epic pleasure. And indeed, nothing defines the epic mode better than to contrast it with tragedy. Tragedy is in the present tense, spoken by impersonating actors; it is fast-paced, taking place, by a very apt Greek convention, within one day; it is

tightly focused on one action, and it usually ends in the hero's death, preceded by excruciating events and dramatically drawn out reverses and recognitions.

Although Aristotle does not work out the pleasure proper to epic (since he thinks tragedy the better genre), its modes and tempos and its specific pleasure can be delineated by contrast. To begin with, epic is told in the past tense and not enacted; it is long-breathed and can encompass a decade and narrate events twenty or a hundred years distant, and its wide focus encompasses the known earth and beyond. In neither of the Homeric epics does the chief protagonist die, and tension does not gather toward a late recognition and reversal, but something much more subtle is afoot (45). Whoever needs a plot driving straight to a denouement will not be able to tolerate epic, which requires not so much a patient as a laid-back listener. The ample telling of the tale, that Homeric time-taking (47), not only affects the reader but also the people of the epic. Tragic heroes tend to undergo sudden catastrophic shifts of fortune—their fate—which leave them transformed but also dead; Odysseus, at least, undergoes a multitude of experiences, vicissitudes that leave him more like himself than ever and very much alive.

The pleasure is correspondingly different. Tragedy may effect a purification of the passions, but the pity and fear will tend to induce grave and dark ponderings, whereas epic calls for nimble and delicious discovery. Tragedy is brief, forceful, close-up, dramatic—"drastic" one might say; epic is extended, insinuating, wide viewed—contemplative in the sense of expansive viewing. Epic-telling—the word "epic" is the adjective from *epos*, the "uttered word," thence the "told tale"—is leisurely yet incident laden, wide-ranging yet purposeful, objective yet feeling-laden, stately yet immediate. Of the Homeric poems, Wordsworth's definition of poetry seems to me fairly

accurate: Poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” While acted tragedy has what we call a “dramatic” impact (*drama* being the Greek word for “deed”), epic, which has only told words, possesses a counter-quality I think of as absorbability, the slowly emergent, detailed, inward refiguring of an event. The slow past-tense telling of epic makes its people and passions and places and artifacts at once more distant and more particularizingly vivid. Epic delight is at once more serene and more sensory than tragic pleasure and thus just a little less questionable than tragic pleasure—perhaps.

The word delight fits that pleasure because it carries in itself two meanings, lightness and deliciousness. They may not seem to apply altogether to the *Iliad*—though they surely do to everything in that poem that is not battle—but they do catch what seems to me the most characteristic feel of reading Homer, the one the postulate of pleasure in the poems specifically intends: the delight given by the lightness of being, manifest above all in the gods, who are light to the point of levity (1), as well as the piquancy of appearance incarnate in the singer whose blindness betokens a heightened acuity of imaginative vision.

READING AND INTERPRETATION

Besides telling some of the delightful discoveries any well-disposed reader can make in the epics, I would like, really incidentally, to demonstrate a way of reading the epics that will, I think, make more such things reveal themselves. “A way of reading” is not quite the same as what critics call “a reading,” that is, a total interpretative hypothesis, but rather the aforementioned mood of trusting expectation, a receptivity to the

poet's signals, and a reliance on all our own life and learning. Although these words are being written in mid-winter the mood is exactly this:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and the summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the pages,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, . . .

The axiom behind such reading, the rather minimal, though by no means uncontroversial working hypothesis, is that the poet made a world that we are authorized to enter and enabled to inhabit by the mere title of our humanity; for all the lands of the imagination live in a territorial union that imposes no passport checks or import duties on the traveler. Less fancifully: If you're human, Homer is home territory.

That could be said of all poetry of stature, but it holds with special force for the Homeric epics. Homer is the most interactive poet imaginable, who nonetheless requires of his readers—it used to be listeners—nothing more than that they be all there. I am about to give a list of obstacles, of distractions in the way of mere attention that, invented with the best of intentions, prevent access to the poetry. Not everyone will be interested in this sorry disquisition, so skipping is encouraged.

Before being caught up in Homeric ways, some readers will be put off by the occasional cumbrous stateliness of Homeric

diction. A hero will say: “What word has escaped the fence of your teeth?” where we would say “Why didn’t you keep your mouth shut?” Or the poet will say “When they had put from themselves the desire for food and drink . . .” (usually after a meal of shish kebab, bread, and wine, prepared in front of our eyes by the heroes themselves), where we would say: “When they were full . . .” One gets used to these graphic and noble formulas, however, and ends up wondering why we can’t talk like that. But then it may be that no one ever did say these things, for Homer’s language is an art language, like Milton’s—the natural language of his imaginative realm: “Heroic spoken here.” In any case, these heroes have no difficulty in descending to ordinary fishwifery; they are splendid pilers-on of insult: “You sodden with wine, who have the face of a dog and the heart of a deer, . . . you people-eating king who lords it over nobodies,” says Achilles to his commander in chief. They can produce the most irreverent hilarity; the singer Demodocus—his name means “People-Enchanter”—tells a tale Homer himself might be above repeating, which gives a graphic account of one of the funniest mishaps ever to befall a pair of adulterous divinities, who are quite literally caught in the act (8). Homer is, to be sure, constrained by the stately tread of his heroic meter, but this constraint makes for a wonderfully throwaway deadpan humor, as when old Nestor, that inveterate giver of superfluous advice, instructs his young son in the tricks of chariot racing “as one knowing to one who well knows it.” This heroic hexameter is also capable of presenting a slice of purely ordinary life, as when the great Achilles is reminded in dactyls by his godfather of how as a toddler he used to dribble wine on the old man’s shirt.

Winckelmann, who founded the study of Greek art and with it esthetic philhellenism, coined a famous capsule char-

acterization of Greek masterworks of sculpture and writing: “noble naïveté, silent grandeur.” It is one of those delineations that are very true from afar and begin to fade close up: Homer *is* simple and grand at a certain distance, but get into the detail and he becomes very sophisticated and *very* human; those heroes are anything but stiff exemplars of splendid idiocy and glorious infantilism.

As Homer’s stateliness should not stand in the way of our engagement, neither should a certain stuffiness in his interpreters. It has a very respectable origin and is very old. Readers have evidently always had the sense of Homeric wisdom and have tried to turn Homer into a crypto-philosopher and the poems into theological allegory.

For those who prefer to get something *out* of Homer to reading things *into* him, another course seems better to me: to acknowledge what was anciently called “that old quarrel between philosophy and poetry” first openly articulated by Socrates, but first engaged in, implicitly though unmistakably, by Parmenides. As Homer of infinite variety is the first poet for us, so single-minded Parmenides is the first philosopher, the first annunciator of the one and only Being that is the chief preoccupation of philosophy. He wrote perhaps two and a half centuries after Homer but in his style: a poem in dactylic hexameter, brief where the epics are long, having as its hero the writer, where the Homeric epics are anonymous. And he is in almost every way the intended opposite of Odysseus. Like Odysseus’ Return, Parmenides’ Way is guided by female divinities, but there the two diverge; while Odysseus, a mature man of many thoughts and many stories, meanders home collecting experience and material treasures on his way, Parmenides is a youth who takes a wild ride right into the heart and house of Truth where one thought overwhelms all multiplicity and ends all speech, and it is this unspeakable treasure,

Being, that he is bidden to take back with him. It is the opposition between the poet's scintillating sensory particulars and the philosopher's illuminated intelligible oneness that these poems exemplify.

It seems to me quite natural that people passionately devoted to philosophy, to a unifying intelligibility beyond and its reflected wisdom within the world, should try to capture Homer for this august enterprise by finding philosophemes and political proto-theory in the poems. I have no doubt that they do contain them, but embodied and contingent, as life contains them, so that we are as welcome to construe Homer as we do the world. But that he meant his poems to contain covert systematic lessons to be laboriously inferred and pedantically formulated—that I doubt: sufficient unto the lay is the subtlety thereof.

Of course there is wisdom to be gathered from the epics, for Homer makes a world for us to enter which is a condensed, heightened, extreme, ideal version of our own and made to yield meaning in ours. Homer's world contains the encampments of war and their strains, civil communities and their crimes, gods and their fateful antics, demigods and their entangling spells, and above all men and women and their antagonistic mutualities. Moreover, the beings of the epics, divine or human, are exuberantly judgmental; they have a large vocabulary, both abstract and adjectival, for virtues and vices, for example: gentlemindedness, thoughtfulness, presence of mind, soundmindedness, kindness, and their opposites.

So it does seem to me that each of the two epics contains an overarching wisdom for meditation, and why not state it here? The *Iliad* shows a harsh truth about human wishing and willing as expressed in the prayer of Achilles and the plan of Zeus (13), the human intention and the divine realization that are the supporting arcs of the *Iliad's* incidents: The god grants

the prayer and inflects the wish through his own impenetrable purpose. Achilles learns that we may accomplish our will and get what we least wished. The *Odyssey* raises looser meditations on the enigma of Return: how the ardently focussed wish to come home is nevertheless deflected by a diverting desire to wander, gathering goods material and immaterial, and how Home tries and rewards the circuitous Returner.

Both Homer's stateliness and the occasional interpreter's stuffiness are hindrances easily overcome, even turned to good account. But there is a veritable Cerberus, that triple-headed guard dog of the underworld, set over the epics to make them inaccessible—a notional threesome that may go by the names “mentality,” “formulaicism,” and “intratextuality.” Let me explain these ungainly terms and how they function.

1 *Mentality.* Homer's heroes are said to have a “mentality.” I would not wish to have a mentality, a mind-set, imputed to me, and I imagine you too as having not a mind-set but thoughts, thoughts spontaneous enough so that I can never second-guess them. No more can we second-guess those vividly ambivalent heroes of Homer. To be sure, since their sayings and deeds are written out, by the second reading we know what they in fact will say and do, but that's just the trivial fact of the fixed past; Homer shows often that he thinks they could have done otherwise, that the characters of epic can act spectacularly out of character or from a deeper nature. I might go so far in riddling speech as to say that it is in their character to go out of character: Aging Helen, for example, still has surprises up her sleeve (24).

There are, of course, good reasons to speak of a Homeric mentality, often an “archaic,” that is, an early, not to say primitive one. The Homeric world is considerably different in its circumstances from ours, and introductions to the poems

tend to make heavy weather of these differences: The gods mingle with humans, some men are kings and others serfs, women belong to men, all the appurtenances of culture are handmade, and glory is on every hero's mind. But since readers could not possibly miss these facts of Homer's world, they need help not in dwelling on its differences but in entering into it.

And that is an entirely achievable goal: The Athenians, who first established and introduced into their ceremonies a canonical text of the epics, regarded Homer as the universal educator of Greece even when the age of kings was long gone, their politics were democratic, chivalry was a distant memory, and the gods were no longer seen among humans. And Homer himself was twice as far away in time from the world of the Trojan War—a world that he brings to a more brilliant life than it may ever have had in fact—as these Athenians were from his time. You really have to be temporally parochial to feel that we in turn are so very distant from those Athenians who gave us the two words that govern our lives: democracy and technology.

But all those grave cogitations would not count for much were it not that on closer reading almost all the social and personal relations some scholars are so bent on finding alien did not grow more and more familiar: Odysseus is, to be sure, a king, and what we might call a conservative, who despises that ill-favored and low-bred incendiary Thersites (5). But he repossesses his island realm with the aid of a swineherd and a ranch hand, whom he regards, out of gratitude and plain feeling, as sons; his relations with women could not be more complex were they the invention of a contemporary novelist, and his wife is his one and only mortal equal (42). Primitive!

Even the gear that forms life's background is not so much beyond our ken: a fully suited-up fullback breaking through

the line of scrimmage, ball in hand, to run into a tackle is surely no less weird to the equitable eye than a fully armed Greek forefighter in front of the line of battle leaping off his chariot to fight a duel with spear and sword (19). Nor are we less attached to the giving and getting of proudly possessable objects of beautiful craftsmanship; witness the gift counter of any department store.

The gods are *the* enigmas in reading Homer (1), but glory- and prize-seeking (28) are immediately comprehensible. Almost invariably freshmen discussing Homer are fixated particularly on Achilles—whom they tend to think of as much younger than he actually is (7)—and what mystifies them is only this: what they themselves are required to mask, their thirst for recognition, this hero of heroes is allowed to make the center of a terrific personal drama. As for the prize seeking, let a few years pass for these youngsters, and that too will become perfectly comprehensible. Then again, to complicate the matter, there is, once more, Odysseus, who announces himself as one whose fame reaches heaven, but who willingly goes into a secluded realm where he is out of sight and out of hearing for a decade (29).

All this would hardly need saying were it not a serious theoretical claim that other societies and eras do have different mentalities, mind-sets ultimately incommensurable with ours. These inaccessible worldviews are not to be contradicted by flamboyant examples of empathy such as I have given, for these might be illusory superficialities (though it is a source of comfort that the proponents of ultimate otherness often supply a vivid description of the “inarticulable” differences).

This “mentality,” an archaic mentality for instance, descends to individuals from their time and their society. (How time and society come by such a mentality, if not from individual human beings thinking, is a yet-higher-order problem.)

It is therefore presented as inescapable for them and inaccessible to us, radically so. Since this is a dismal theory under whose aegis to read an ancient text, I offer this modest resolution: Let it be granted that the Homeric world is full of conditions and objects very different from those of our world. It would follow that Homer's people *think about different things, not that they think differently*. A leisured teenager in America might think about a souped up hotrod, and a young prince of Ithaca might care about a well-wrought chariot, and the differences between car and chariot carry a myriad of implications, but if we have some empathy for the dreams of the one, we will understand the hopes of the other. They do not think differently, if by that we mean "think in an alien mode." Truth to tell, since it is in principle impossible for me to ascertain what the object of such thinking might be, because the matter of thought becomes indeterminate when the mode is incommensurable with mine, there couldn't be much profit in reading anything that wasn't in time and space right next to me. So the hypothesis of "mentality" will be avoided in the chapters to come, and every Homeric being will be expected to display the spontaneity proper to an individual and the intelligibility expected of a human being.

2 *Formulaicism*. The most widely accepted interpretative theory for several generations has been this: A good proportion of the epics is composed of building blocks, the memory stock of oral poets. These blocks may be whole passages or single lines that are repeated, but more often they are epithets, descriptive tags attached to names such as "Achilles, swift of foot" (. . . *pō- dās | ō- kŷs Ā- | chīl- lēus*) and "Odysseus of many designs" (. . . *pō- lŷ- | mē- tīs Ō- | dŷs- sēus*). They can be seen to fit neatly into the last part of the dactylic hexameter and can be used routinely with others that fit elsewhere to

ease the strain on the orally composing poet. To be a professional singer would be to have a large supply of such tags handy and not to scruple to repeat passages just to get twice the run for the honorarium.

There is no denying that there is repetition in the epics, though not enough to produce a sense of hearing the same thing over and over. Some of the long, repeated passages are repetitions of messages. We hear the original message and its delivery. The point is that the delivered message usually contains some minute but poignantly significant alteration. Whoever listens will hear something wonderfully new. For example, our Odysseus, the universal ambassador, delivers to an angry Achilles a not-altogether-well-conceived message from his commander in chief, Agamemnon, who has deprived him quite gracelessly of his prize and its glory. Odysseus repeats the message accurately as given—with a tiny graceful courtesy stuck in at a particularly delicate part: “my lord,” delivered no doubt with a courtly obeisance. Greek audiences into classical times, the era of Athenian drama, seem to have had a phenomenally fine ear; if I can see it, surely they could hear it.

The nametags, called epithets (21), are undeniably sometimes routine. In particular there is an epithet that occurs over a hundred times in the *Odyssey*; it is translated anywhere from “divine” through “brilliant” to “goodly,” and applied to anyone and everything because it is so usable a metric fragment. Right in the beginning, Aegisthus, the hobgoblin of the *Odyssey*, is unfavorably recalled by Zeus, but given the epithet “blameless,” which not even my ready trust in Homer’s acuteness can bring itself to read as irony; it’s just a metrically convenient, denotatively inept adjective.

But far more often, apparent inappropriateness—howlers evidently born of Homeric nodding—turns out to be subtly perfect. Here is an example from a great scene in the *Iliad*, the

above-mentioned embassy to Achilles, who is sitting before his tent, sullenly *hors de combat*, out of the public eye but face-to-face with the friend he will soon send to his death, singing to the lyre of mortal fame. The delegation arrives; Achilles, surprised by their coming, jumps up, lyre in hand, to greet them. So doing, he is called “swift-footed”—surely not for his gesture of amazement. The proponents of formulaic composition might cite this as a case of ineptitude, but in fact it is Homer at his most adept.

Let me again call Aristotle to aid. He invented a term for that culminating completion in which a being is what it was meant to be: “Held-in [the timeless moment of its own] fulfillment”: *entelecheia*. The usual translation is “actuality.” He distinguished a first and a second such actuality. Feet may be actually swiftly moving, but this runner’s actuality is only second to a primary one: whether sitting, lyre in hand, or rising in greeting, Achilles *is* a swift-footed runner; it is his very nature to be swift, swift footed and swift fated, whatever he might “actually” be doing (7).

So as an interpretative theory, formulaicism is a hindrance to attentive reading. It has had this effect on some translations that omit epithets at will, so readers cannot even judge whether they are missing something delightful.

3 *Intratextuality*. This formidable term belongs to literary theory and means that compositions of words are not about the world but about themselves, that words refer only to other words of the text, so that the text is its own world and is the only world of poetry—the poet’s characters cannot cast loose from his words. Thus a responsible reading should not reach beyond the words to any actual being denoted by them and displaying occasionally a certain independent originating power and solidity, the kind called “subsistence” by philoso-

phers: a determinate, consistent, stable way of being. In other words, the reader is to stay within the text and not to speculate that the author *meant* to be talking *about* that person or that place, and not to round out the text by the auditory and visual imagination. In consequence of this theory fictions are “radically incomplete,” a logical phrase which means merely that you can’t answer most questions about the characters of the fiction because the author doesn’t give the information and there is no being beyond the words to appeal to. Thus, if you ask the text what is the color of Odysseus’ hair, the answer is auburn, tawny, reddish gold, because the text says so in a word, but if you ask the color of his eyes, there is no answer; we know only that they were beautiful. And yet I have a sense, amounting to conviction, that I do know the color of his eyes. Similarly, the ancients and their modern successors have liked to think that they might ask just what song the Sirens sang to passing sailors that would be so dangerous for Odysseus to hear. But that would, on the intratextual hypothesis, be a proscribed question, and yet the very one to which an engaged reader might have a plausible answer (33).

Such readings of the word without a world—denatured readings one might call them—often lead, oddly enough, to irresponsibly inventive, witty word construals, at odds with the postulate of trust that a great poem should be in at least one respect treated as sacred text: insofar as the reader tries to be no more than the faithful servitor of the poem, the eager discoverer of the poet’s intention rather than the proud inventor of unintended linguistic windfalls. Reference to a coherently imaginable “extratextual” world seems to be both a better warrant for the feasibility and a better control on the plausibility of an interpretation than staying within the verbal texture. I don’t deny that there are works whose fictional beings are woven into a background tapestry of scenes and situations,

beings that take their character from the web of relations which delineate them—flat creatures intended to be serviceable to a plot and so well bonded into the texture of the text that they have no independent life. But Homer, though he may well have inherited story lines, takes his departure from the people, who spin their tale out of their natures—the scenes, settings, even the artifacts, emanate *from them*. In the *Odyssey* this description becomes spectacularly true when Odysseus becomes the weaver of a fairyland that is an externalization of his own soul (39).

There is a fact specific to the epic against such a self-confining approach of reading words without their world. Homer *himself* thinks that he is telling the tales *of* a passion, the anger of Achilles, and *of* a man, the wanderer Odysseus, and that these come to him through the Muse who sings for him of the people and of the events known among the gods (16). Thence comes the fact that Alexander, who wanted to reincarnate Achilles but lacked a Homeric Muse, merely conquered the world for a moment, while his avatar Achilles captivated the ages (7).

Hence I shall write of the epics as of a finite number of words telling of an indefinitely large world.

ODYSSEY AND ILIAD

Early death and a young warrior's baneful attempt to deflect it is the theme of the *Iliad* (10), and battle deaths have a grim grandeur that makes the intervening moments of life all the more poignant. Long life, its multiplicitous experiences, and its single-minded purpose are the theme of the *Odyssey*. The brief life of deathbound young heroes is more glorious than the extended life span of aging survivors, but the latter is a lot

more interesting. To me, at least, the vicissitudes of the *Odyssey* are more involving than the grandeur of the *Iliad*. To put it another way: The *Odyssey* more reliably rewards the noticing attention, and noticing is the working mode of trustful reading.

Longinus, after Aristotle the best-known critic in antiquity, thought that Homer composed the *Odyssey* in his old age, not just because it is an epilogue to the *Iliad*, but because it is in old age that poets become lovers of confabulation, the telling of fantasies and myths (*to philomython*). What he says is borne out by Shakespeare, whose late plays, for example *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, are works of sophisticated fancy. It is also true that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* belong together as War and Peace: Ten years of war before the Trojan gates has hatched in the young warrior Achilles the anger that bursts out in the *Iliad*; ten years of voyaging home have prepared for the returning veteran Odysseus the situation he meets in Ithaca. The first circumstance might account for the far more straightforward telling of the *Iliad*, compared to the complex composition of the *Odyssey* (25, 36); the second means that the *Iliad* and its aftermath are, so to speak, contained in the *Odyssey*. Not only is the memory of the great and costly expedition, launched for so unworthy a cause and concluded with so trifling a gain, on the minds of the humans and divinities of the *Odyssey*; the soul-stirring events that occurred between the *Iliad* and the Return of Odysseus are artfully insinuated into the *Odyssey*: the death and funeral of Achilles (31), the capture of Troy by means of the Trojan Horse (35), the suicide of Ajax (6), the fatal Return of Agamemnon (30). (These events are expanded on in the post-Homeric poems called the "Epic Cycle.") Aristotle thought that Homer was "divinely inspired" in not attempting to make the *Iliad* into a poem of the whole war, for the multitude of incidents would

have robbed the poem of its monumental unity. But he could not say that of the *Odyssey*, which is the compensating catch-all, a tightly woven container of the whole war as it is relived in the memories of wives, veterans, and singers.

Moreover, while the *Iliad* is Achilles' poem, the record of a terrific tantrum and its fatalities, and the *Odyssey* is in name and fact Odysseus' poem, relating the veteran's circuitous and perilous Return, the figure of dead Achilles is an animating principle, a latent presence, and, so to speak, the hidden armature of the *Odyssey*; he appears implicitly in its first lines (14), overtly at its dead center and gloriously at its end (31), and, again, implicitly everywhere as Odysseus' opposite (7). We might well read the *Iliad* without knowing the *Odyssey*, but to read the *Odyssey* without reference to the *Iliad* would be to read under a handicap, for one defining aspect of the second poem's protagonist, the tardy homecomer, is that he is the incarnate antithesis of the prematurely culminating young warrior. Where Achilles is short lived, swift-fated, and swift-footed, Odysseus will grow old, endure heavy vicissitudes, see his runner's legs go through wear and tear, and reach his great moment in late middle age; Achilles has one man as bosom friend while Odysseus is befriended by a series of women, young and not young, human and divine; Achilles is, in his own estimation, a man of truth while Odysseus is a proudly accomplished liar (10, 38). All in all, Achilles is a blazingly prodigious being while Odysseus is just an interesting man—though perhaps the most interesting man ever to get into a poem.

The epics surely mirror their protagonists' nature, the one marching forward over a few weeks, grandly, simply, and inexorably (5) to Hector's death and Achilles' end, the other meandering slowly and expansively, over ten years of artfully involuted time toward Odysseus' recovery of Ithaca and Penelope.

The *Odyssey* is therefore a work complex in its very conception: at once a self-contained poem *and* a complement to its predecessor. For that and all the reasons given above, I concentrate on the *Odyssey* but refer continually to the *Iliad*.

Aristotle says:

In drama episodes are abbreviated, but it is through them that epic poetry gains its length. The story (*logos*) of the *Odyssey* is not long. A certain man has been away from home for many years, he is stalked by Poseidon and is alone. Furthermore the situation in his house is that his wealth is being spent by wooers and his son is plotted against. After being storm-tossed he arrives, reveals who he is and, attacking his enemies, saves himself and destroys them. That, then, is the story proper, the rest is episodes.

In the chapters to follow, I will recall just enough of the “story,” the plain-song, as it were, of the *Odyssey*, as is needed to sustain the contrapuntal voices, those “episodes,” the Homeric moments.