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### **Some Home Truths About Homer's *Iliad***

This is a homecoming. That's home truth no. 1. There are eleven more to follow. I'm not one of those who can be attracted to a grand unified theory about the *Iliad*, or about the universe, for that matter—a somewhat lesser problem, in my judgement.

We don't know anything important about Homer himself. Home truth no. 2. We do not know where he lived or what he knew, except that he knew a certain style of poetry inside out; and we do not know if he was male or

female. I think that there are decisive reasons to believe that the composer of the *Iliad* was female. Home truth no. 3. I shall give you some of these reasons, but first let me ask you to dwell a moment on the mere possibility.

Nausicaa revealed herself to Samuel Butler as the authoress of the *Odyssey*. But on Butler's terms, a much better case could have been made that Helen was the authoress of the *Iliad*. In the movement of Homer's extraordinary similes, we go from images of an almost unimaginable, cataclysmic war, where the cosmos also is in convulsion, to images drawn from peace and the farm and mountain pastures, ocean views from a headland and the varieties of cloud, wind and weather. This is a movement that pegs the unfamiliar queerly and boldly upon the familiar: it is the latter half of the simile that poet and audience knew. She did not need to know battle, but the minstrels' battle poetry; not volleys of stones from ramparts, but the blanketing of a snow fall; not the view from the field, but from the battlements; and like Helen, she needed a room of her own to produce her work. She was not a warrior, or a heroiser of warriors: she knew very well what was fake and what genuine about heroic poetry, what worked and what didn't, that glorifying was not the way to get at the truth about war and

the hero, or at what was truly epic. She had an extraordinary gift for conjuring the presence of a figure or an act. This composer was a poet who wrote a poem. If it helps you to meet this poem as poetry, by imagining the author as female, then please do so.

The *Purunanuru* of Tamil *cankam* supplies us a paradigm of high-caste poets, some of them women, who lived in higher rooms, but who were inspired by working bards and their idiom.<sup>1</sup> The late A. K. Ramanujan comments on the Tamil poems that they

... are not the result of rapid composition like oral epics, but of subtle care and reworking ... Yet the authors were close to the stock-in-trade of bards and minstrels who were often their subjects and who were very much alive all around them.<sup>2</sup>

This paradigm allows us to separate the poet from the bard, although both may have worked in the same musical genre. Consider that the *Odyssey's*

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<sup>1</sup> George L. Hart and Hank Heifetz, *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pg. xxiii

<sup>2</sup> A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pg. 273

Penelope descends from her loft to critique the performance of a male bard among feasting men (1.328-44). Helen is depicted as the ‘composer’ of an Iliadic web that she has woven and is embroidering, with depictions of the struggles and combat waged on her behalf (III.125-8). And her famous expression to Hector in Book VI is a metapoetic vision of their worthiness to be sung about (VI.357-8):

δᾶερ, ἐπεὶ σε μάλιστα πόνος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν  
 εἴνεκ' ἐμεῖο κυνὸς καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἔνεκ' ἄτης,  
 οἷσιν ἐπὶ Ζεὺς θῆκε κακὸν μόρον, ὡς καὶ ὀπίσσω  
 ἀνθρώποισι πελώμεθ' ἀοίδιμοι ἔσσομένοισι.

Brother dear, since it is you most of all whose mind is beset with trouble,  
 Because of me, the bitch, and because of Alexander's folly—  
 We upon whom Zeus has placed an evil fate, so that even in the hereafter  
 Of humanity we be sung about—songs for men yet to be.

It is precisely aristocratic women, in a warrior society at war, who had the time and the scope to produce and also to critique works of art, who are in fact depicted as doing so, whose view, like Helen's (III.162 ff.) and Andromache's (VI.433-9), was synoptic from the battlements and yet particularly invested—and who had rooms of their own.

Consider the simile that describes the pain of Agamemnon's arm wound (XI.269-272):

As if he were a woman in labor  
 Struggling with the stabbing pain  
 Hera's daughters dispense  
 When they preside at a childbirth.<sup>3</sup>

As I have indicated, there is a cognitive movement from unknown to known in a simile that leaves both sides of the comparison transformed in the aftermath. Is it conceivable that a male poet could take us to the interiority of Agamemnon's pain by comparing it to labour pain? What male poet would dare to bridge the unfamiliar to the familiar in this way? Contrast the use of this figure in the prophet Isaiah, who was perhaps contemporary, where the compare is either psychological or physically interior: 'Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in travail...' (13:8; 21:3). The subject is understood to be reduced by the gendering to a shamefully helpless state. Homer's simile, by contrast, moves to the Εἰλείθιαι, the divinities who come to be present at childbirth: there is a dignity and a certain mystery in this movement. The simile forges a bond between a female poet and likely a feminine audience — albeit in the sympathy of a misogynist king. Male bards who sing

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<sup>3</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Stanley Lombardo, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997, pg. 206

(Achilles in Book IX, for example, and Phemius and Demodocus in the Odyssey) are a part of the tapestry in Homer. They are not necessarily his alter egos. I once knew a student in the BP who had experienced both an arrow wound and labour pains. She said that they were not alike. What the poet of the Iliad knew was not arrow wounds, or flights of stones from ramparts in war: it was war poetry; it was blanketing snow falls; and it was labour pains.

Consider also the simile from Book XXIII, which describes the distance in a foot-race between the speedy Ajax, son of Oileus, and Odysseus:

ἄγχι μάλ', ὡς ὅτε τίς τε γυναικὸς ἐϋζώνοιο  
 στήθεός ἐστι κανών, ὅν τ' εὖ μάλα χερσὶ τανύσση  
 πηνίον ἐξέλκουσα παρὲκ μίτον, ἀγχόθι δ' ἴσχει  
 στήθεος: ὡς Ὀδυσσεὺς θέεν ἐγγύθεν, αὐτὰρ ὀπισθεν  
 ἴχνια τύπτε πόδεσσι πάρος κόνιν ἀμφιχυθῆναι: (760-4)

very close, close as a fair girdled woman's  
 breast is to a weaving rod, when she draws it skilfully in her hands,  
 dragging the spool past the warp, and she holds it right next  
 her breast; so close did Odysseus run, and behind  
 he struck the tracks with his feet before their dust had settled.

Homer then speaks of him breathing down Ajax' neck. Note the perspective here: perhaps the performer himself looks down the barrel of his staff and draws it to himself. (The classical rhapsode was depicted as bearing a staff as his only prop.) We are looking intimately over the shoulder of the woman. Of course it is always possible for a simile to surprise and move us by comparing two very different things that are both, all the same, familiar. But if I had to bet between settling dust, breathing down the neck and other racetrack clichés, and the sharp rod drawn close to the chest, I would bet that this poet was a weaver, not an athlete.

You may have noticed that there are no Greeks at all in Homer—the word 'Greek' is derived from Latin—and that there are no Hellenes either. First and foremost, and properly speaking, the Hellenic was a linguistically defined group, not a culturally or geographically defined one. Hence not only the Argives and the Myrmidons, but the Trojans as well are 'Greeks'. So in no sense was there ever a war between Greeks and Trojans. Home truth no. 4. To be sure, there is something vaguely oriental about Priam's polygamous arrangements, just as there is something Hellenic about his children's monogamy. Something is in transition there, but it is impossible

to get one's bearings, so as to say from what to what. It is, in fact, a rather complete and embarrassing mystery how the language of Homer's poems came to be called after the descendants of Hellên, and why the people associated with this language also took on his eponym for themselves and for their speech—while, for some reason, they identified themselves with the Achaeans of the *Iliad* rather than the other Greeks whom they were attacking.

Contrary to what you may have heard, there is no settled fact about the location of the city called Ilium, or of the horse-breeding, river-filled region called Troy, or of the ocean called the Hellespont, the 'sea of Hell'. If Troy was in Turkey, Homer was not only blind, but a liar. Home truth no. 5. The best that we can say about his audience, if Ilium was actually that now profitable mound in Hissarlik, is that they had obviously never been to Anatolia.

The origin of Homer's poetry is in a particular dance of the Muses. Home truth no. 6. Every line of his poems is in a metre called the 'dactylic



hexameter'. This means that there are six dactyls, bum ba da, per line, with the last foot a short one. The usual rhythm is:

Bum ba da bum ba da bum ba; da bum ba da bum ba da bum ba

There is evidence that this is a dance rhythm. The very word 'foot', inherited from the ancient world, suggests this rather obviously. Consider that the dactylic foot is perfectly balanced—the weak part is equivalent in time length to the strong part. This 'isochrony' in the foot is typical of dance rhythm, whereas speech-based poetic rhythms tend to have contrastive pulses, the weak part being shorter or less stressed than the strong part. (Aristotle alludes in his *Poetics* to the fact that normal Greek speech rhythm was in fact iambic in this sense, as is English speech.) Consider that most modern classical music, which is based explicitly on dance rhythms, also shows this time equivalence of the stressed and unstressed portions of the bar. There is also a living descendant of the ancient dactylic dances; the σούρτος is a round dance that is in fact the national dance of Greece. (It was performed as part of the closing ceremony at the Athens Olympics in 2004.) Here is a video that shows what it is like to dance a version of the modern σούρτος to Homer's verses. Note in particular the retrogression in

each hexametric segment that breaks up the rightward motion, and how it corresponds to the characteristic word-breaks in the Homeric line.

There is no such thing as 'Greek mythology'. Home truth no. 7. If you have been unfortunate enough to take a course or read a book on this subject, try to forget as much as you can of them when you read Greek poets. The sources for such compendia are either Hellenistic or Roman, or else 'lifts' from earlier authors and composers that have been disguised as general stories, rather than the particular plots of particular story-tellers. Homer is the original, not the product, and the notion of 'Greek mythology' is pernicious in many ways to the nature of this poetic origin.

One way is that it suggests that there was a script or scripture to which the Greek poets were referring, or in relation to which they were improvising. Nothing could be further from the truth. There was no Bible in ancient Greece. In point of fact, it was primarily and preeminently the poets through whom the rest of society best got to know their common stories, which were usually understood to be stories about the past, not adventures into fantasyland. This is true despite the fact that there must also have been oral traditions of the fairy-tale variety, passed on from grandparents to

toddlers and the like. An audience in the theatre would surely not have been a blank slate. They would have known something about Oedipus and Hecuba before the plays began. But this does not mean that they knew what they were going to see. There may, for example, have been alternate traditions. But they may also, let us hope, have been simply surprised. And let us not forget that witnessing a plot was only one part of the experience of Aeschylean or Sophoclean drama. The choruses danced poetry that had never before been seen or heard; and the power of this poetry has long endured past the death of its original witnesses and their language.

There is no doubt that the lyric and tragic poets were looked to as types of authority, not just on the mythic past but on the sophistic present. This authority of the poets is what needs to be emphasised to a modern audience. Even the archaic poet-singer, the ἀοιδός whom Homer describes, was a public worker or demiurge, not a member of the entertainment sector. There was not only authority but autonomy: there was no review board or doctrinal council approving scripts before the fact. (To be sure, there was critique afterwards, including prosecution in court, for ‘profanation of the Mysteries’—that is, enacting things on the stage that were too close to the dramatic or other rituals that constituted the secret

religious Mysteries.) We may imagine that it was the sheer potency of the poetry itself—not some anachronistic fidelity to doctrine—which would make a poet's depiction of gods and men persuasive, and hence prize-worthy.

Consider Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigeneia. You have probably heard of her as the daughter who had to be sacrificed to Artemis, so that the Achaean fleet would be freed from the headwinds that moored them in Aulis, preventing their passage to Troy. You have heard of her, ultimately, because of Aeschylus. Well: Homer seems not to have heard of her at all. There is a definite tension between the prophet Calchas and Agamemnon in the opening scene of the *Iliad*, which could be explained by way of allusion to an earlier incident, where Calchas' interpretation of an omen demanded the sacrifice. In this case it demands that the King return his war-prize, the girl Chryseis, to her father, an Apolline priest of the Troad. But there is no direct allusion whatsoever to the sacrifice, in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, not even as a motive for Clytaemnestra's revenge. (The story of Agamemnon's death, in a version where not Clytaemnestra but her

stay-at-home back-door lover Aegisthus was the evil perpetrator, is a looming motif in the *Odyssey*.)

The two Homeric poems are famous for avoiding mention of incidents that occur in the other poem—the *Odyssey* never retells an event from the *Iliad*, but sometimes refers to different but oddly parallel events that occurred during the war. There may well be an aesthetic motive or convention for this strange avoidance in what is, after all, a sequel in our sense of things. Perhaps then there was a prehistoric poem about Aulis and Iphigeneia which was lost, even to ancient posterity? The inconsistency seems too great, however. When Agamemnon lists his children in *Iliad* IX, he mentions his son Orestes and three daughters: Chrysothemis, Laodice, and Iphianassa. The warlord-king Agamemnon mentions them as possible brides for Achilles, as part of the bribe for their quarrel's appeasement. Given the role of Achilles in some of the other stories that contain her, as a prospective husband for Iphigeneia, it is highly unlikely that Homer's Agamemnon is omitting her because she is dead. He hopes to become Achilles' father-in-law; in this way he is only one of several in Homer's telling who competes to be a sort of father figure to Achilles. Aside from

Peleus himself, the mortal father who does not appear, there is also Phoenix, and most remarkably of all, the Trojan King Priam in Book XXIV. Hence Agamemnon's offer here to Achilles from the bounty of his daughters has a certain internal resonance within the narrative strategy of Homer's story.

For Aeschylus, by contrast, the sacrifice of this Iphigeneia becomes the centrepiece of a kind of cosmic vision, which plays out in his *Oresteia* through a sequence of counter-murders into an ultimate destination in the Areopagus, the Hill of Ares at Athens. Here the first civic court was set up to break the cycle of revenge and settle the price of blood-guilt through that great civilising innovation, a jury trial. Her actual death at her father's hands is the key to the whole progress of this vision. There is also in the second play of the *Oresteia* a famous recognition and discovery scene between Orestes and his sister Electra—one that inspired an imitation by Sophocles, and a parody by Euripides, who both wrote an *Electra*. This is another daughter of Agamemnon, whom Homer apparently had not heard of, or mourned the loss of, long before she inspired Eugene O'Neill.

But when Euripides tells the story, in *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, she does not die. (Perhaps I should repeat, she does not die.) Euripides introduces the notion of Achilles as the prospective bridegroom, whom Agamemnon deceives into luring his daughter, along with Clytaemnestra, to Aulis for the wedding. (There are a number of further complications that Euripides no doubt invented. I imagine a playwright finds it irresistible to find ways of getting Clytaemnestra on stage.) Aeschylus had nothing to do with this element of the allegedly 'mythological' story. And at the last minute, Artemis relents, and substitutes a deer for the girl, who is taken up by the gods. She then shows up in Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, incognito, where she is reunited with her brother Orestes. The discovery scene between them is held up by Aristotle as exemplary, comparable in effect only to that in the *Oedipus Rex* (*Poetics* 1455a). Hence this moment is, for Euripides, a centre of dramaturgical interest: the reunion of Orestes with the sister whom he had thought lost forever, and she with him. Iphigeneia's salvific quasi-resurrection is the poetic key to the cathartic power of the reunion. So what do you find in a book called 'Greek Mythology' when you look up 'Iphigeneia'? Considering what these three poets have given you, how would you tell the story? Did she exist? Was she sacrificed? The fact of the

matter is that there is no such thing as a ‘story of Iphigeneia’. Home truth no. 7a. The reality we are looking at is a product of poets: in this case three poets and their radically divergent purposes. It is not as though their take on Iphigeneia is in some sense tangential to their poetic motive. It is impossible even to ask such things as ‘did she exist?’, or ‘was her ending happy or sad?’, outside of the context of these poetic aims, and the moments and momentum they mean to create.

If you read a book of ‘Greek Mythology’—and they are legion, they constitute a genre, some of them famously authored books from the ancient and the modern worlds, alongside those anonymous textbooks for high school indoctrinations and college lecture courses—you will discover that the Trojan War resulted from a thing called ‘The Judgement of Paris’. Homer once refers to this event, briefly in a sometimes doubted passage, in the final, twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*—and nowhere else. The study of myth is a wonderful thing. But it needs a new name. (Perhaps ‘archetypics’?) Because a dismal trivialisation of what the Greek poets were about, has made it come to pass that the only true mythology, is mythology itself. There are even students and readers who will ‘correct’ what they



read, in Homer, or Aeschylus, or Euripides. Oh for God's sake—read the poems.

Obviously we will never know if Helen was ever at Troy, or if, as Herodotus claims, Homer only told that version because it made for better poetry.

There is a combination of claims we may draw from Herodotus that is worth noting: that Homer taught the Greeks about their gods, and that his aim, above fidelity to truth, was to produce the most compelling poetry. The aesthetic aim cannot be distinguished here from the truth-telling; nor the poetic prowess from the religious authority. Home truth no. 8. If Homer had not been such a damn good poet, no one would have listened to him for the truth about the gods.

But in saying that Homer and Hesiod taught the Greeks the names of the gods and their personae and natures, Herodotus is not saying that they made them up, either the names or the gods. That would fly in the face of something quite programmatic in Herodotus, a demonstration through his history that in the world he travelled, people by and large knew and worshipped the same gods, with interesting but local exceptions. It was the

names and the rituals that were different. Homer did not make up the idea, for example, that the goddess of love was married to the smith god, who was cuckolded by the war god. This is an Indo-European motif. The story gets told in the *Odyssey* about how Hephaestus traps Ares and Aphrodite in bed, but if Athena is a sort of double of Hephaestus, an analogous collocation happens in *Iliad* XXI, where Athena defeats Ares and Aphrodite and they end up horizontal together—albeit not in bed this time, but stretched out upon the bounteous earth (426). (I should note that in the *Iliad*, Hephaestus appears not to be married to Aphrodite, but to beautiful Charis of the shining veil. Clearly it's good to be the blacksmith, however lame.) The work of Georges Dumézil collects the great wealth of common Indo-European material which Homer did not 'make up'.

Apart from the comparative evidence, however, I wish to share with you a feeling of mine that I do not know how to objectify. Homer is not creating the gods, like characters in a sitcom or a fantasy adventure. He is trying to get them right. That is to say, he is trying to capture them as they most truly and characteristically are, in the way of a portrait painter and his subject, or

a landscape artist and a mountain. The style is sometimes realist, sometimes impressionist, sometimes abstract and surreal.

A part of Homer's poetic arsenal is the technique of personification. Two of the most striking examples are Eris, 'Strife,' who 'at first raises her crest but a little, but afterwards, /she plants her head in the heaven and strides upon the earth.'

ἢ τ' ὀλίγη μὲν πρῶτα κορύσσεται, αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα  
οὐρανῶ ἐστήριξε κάρη καὶ ἐπὶ χθονὶ βαίνει: (IV. 442-3)

How does one respond imaginatively to this swelling embodiment? In the opening lines of the poem strife is instead embodied as a pair in the grammatical dual number, Atreides (Agamemnon) and Achilles. Is the substance of strife differently understood in the singular, cresting, feminine form? Easier for me to conceptualise are the Λιταί, the Prayers that are said to be daughters of Zeus, lame, wrinkled, eyes askance, who follow carefully in the wake of blindness and ruin (IX.502-4). Phoenix invokes them in his plea to Achilles to forgive Agamemnon.

But the Olympian gods are not personifications. They are simply persons. They have traits and characters that distinguish them and make them recognisable. Who are they? An answer that is not often heard today, but which is a commonplace in the context of ancient science and religion, is that these names of the gods refer to the planets. You may notice that on the shield of Achilles, there are the sun, moon and stars, and Homer lists a number of the constellations still visible today. It would be extremely strange if someone so bent on covering the heavens had forgotten the planets. Unless of course the gods are the planets. It is well known that the ancient religion was 'astral', and that the planets were universally feared and venerated, but it is common now for references not to be taken, as on the shield.

It is not always easy, aside from the obvious cases like Ares and Zeus (Mars and Jupiter), to tell which planet corresponds to which god. This in itself bespeaks a strange tale; that perhaps the current heavens are not what they used to be. The word 'planet', after all, is Greek for 'wanderer', and this is one thing that the planets do not do nowadays. They stay on course. Plato in the *Timaeus* reports that shifts in the planetary courses

produce cataclysms and catastrophes on the earth. (Shakespeare also refers to this notion as a high piece of political symbolism.) Given the roles of the gods in the poem, the time of the *Iliad* must have been a highly active one in the planetary realm. Aside from the severities of wind and rain, there are some truly bizarre atmospheric events reported; consider XI. 54: Zeus sends dew dripping with blood, because of the many heads that were to be sent to Hades on that day. In Book XX there is the abortive *Götterdämmerung*, where all the gods chuff up and almost join in battle; Poseidon so shook the earth that the roots of Mount Ida trembled, and Aidoneus the lord of the shades leapt from his throne in fear that his dank realm would be exposed to mortals and immortals alike. The earth and cosmos are in catastrophe, the separate realms are being confounded, and the basement of the structure is in danger of being exposed. The sense here is not a romantic projection or an exaggeration to heighten the depiction of battle. The latter in particular would be completely unnecessary. It is rather the case that this Trojan war took place in extraordinary and catastrophic times. Sometimes the cosmic interventions appeared to favour one side; sometimes the other. For long stretches it appeared that the gods had lost interest in the fray. Zeus aloof on his peak

is mirrored in Achilles aloof, self-exiled in his hut. In the Greek context, unlike some others, to be chosen by the gods almost invariably means being marked off, like Oedipus, for an exemplary doom.

In Book VIII, Zeus challenges the other gods to 'try it out for themselves'. If all the gods and goddesses were to hang a golden chain from heaven, and pull, still they could not drag Zeus to the ground. Whereas if he ever felt like it, he says, he could drag the lot of them, together with the earth herself and the sea, and bind them all to a peak of Olympus just hanging there in mid-air. (This chain of the gods motif appears to be world-wide; it can be connected to the totem.) The thing is a threat, and Zeus backs off with a smile. Homer seems to like this affect, of taking us to the brink, as in the *Götterdämmerung* scene. I would like to point out that modern science teaches something far more fantastic than this image of the golden chain: gravity is an invisible rope that is supposed to act instantaneously and at a distance. There is nothing truly miraculous like this in Homer's story-telling. Hence the gods are cosmic agencies. Home truth no. 9. They are anthropomorphised, not personified. Perhaps the poetry manages to humanise somewhat the otherwise terrifying material forces that threatened

the very stability of the earth. But the real trick of this anthropomorphosis poetically, it seems to me, is the ability it gives Homer to depict an interaction between divine and human, that places us within the cosmos. It makes us players. I find it impossible to imagine in pictures the combat between a warrior and a god—what it would mean exactly for a warrior to attack a god. And yet Homer’s anthropomorphic or semi-anthropomorphic depiction somehow makes the combat plausible. There is still something fantastic, designedly unimaginable about these episodes. What is it to hold converse with a river one is attacking, for example? What sort of portent is Athena’s tasseled aegis? And what exactly does Patroclus experience when Apollo strikes him in the back with the flat of his hand? What exactly is this ‘flat’ of the hand? Is it the feeling of a spank, or a bully’s playground shove? These moments challenge the imagination, but there is no question that this challenge is a part of a poetic effect that is wondrous and unforgettable.

If Aphrodite is a goddess who governs both gods and men—recall the seduction of Zeus by Hera, that almost alters the course of the war—then there is not a difference in kind between the discharges among the planets,

and the erotic pangs we feel in the heart and loins. The love of Paris for Helen is part of a cosmic plan. Helen and Aphrodite can be depicted in conversation: you sleep with him! says Helen to the goddess. Is Helen a free agent or not? Homer does not answer this question, but his depiction of the conversation somehow poses the question in an extraordinary way. You can see this if you consider how much would have been lost if Helen had merely delivered a tortured soliloquy before sleeping with Paris. This goes also for the scenes with Achilles, when he is talking to his mother Thetis (how vividly he comes across as a Mamma's boy), or when Athena pulls him by the hair, unseen by anyone else, to prevent him killing his king. It is possible to interpret these scenes as a kind of extroverted psychology, a way of dramatising an inner conversation, but think how much would be lost if the god was not there. I am tempted to say again, that an aesthetic motive leads to a kind of truth-telling about our condition. Aphrodite is real, is she not. Home truth no. 9a. Think how differently one responds to her, from the way one responds to a mere explanation, moral, psychological, or chemical, in terms of desire and hormones.



Consider lines 3 and 4 of *Iliad* I. The subject of the sentence is the anger of Achilles, from the first line; ‘hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,/great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion,/feasts for the dogs and birds ...’. Translators like Fagles here often use the word ‘bodies,’ but this is highly misleading, because in English ‘body’ carries with it oppositions to both ‘soul’ and ‘mind’. There is no such opposition in Homer. Moreover, the word often so translated is not even a noun: it is αὐτούς, a pronoun that is sometimes personal and sometimes intensive. Here it is both. Consider well the implications of the following translation: ‘many and mighty were the souls [his anger] hurled into Hades, souls of heroes, but they themselves it made a spoil for jackals.’ The distinction is between heroes’ souls, and the heroes themselves. The latter stayed on the battlefield.

Clearly the ψυχή in Homer is not the Platonic soul. It is not even really the animating principle; this seems more in Homer to be the θυμός, the ‘hot breath’ that leaves a warrior’s lungs not to return upon his death. It dissipates. If he recovers, as does Hector in Book XV, after he has been struck by Ajax while Zeus is distracted in bed with Hera, his θυμός is said

to be ‘regathered,’ I think literally in the lungs—he can breathe again. This θυμός is also the best candidate in Homer for the repository of consciousness; it is the place where emotions are felt. It can be objectified, however, outside the personality; Odysseus is famous for chiding his θυμός, encouraging it to ‘bear up’. While the departure of the ψυχή is certainly also a marker of the moment of death, the ψυχή itself seems rather to be a kind of remnant, a shadowy, gibbering entity, bat-like, as befits its abode in the dank darkness of the invisible realm. Typically it bewails the loss of true life and youth; the human himself has been left behind. When Andromache first sees Hector being dragged behind Achilles’ car toward the ships, she is said to exhale (καπύειν) her ψυχή (XXII.467); the verb suggests that it is a thing of smoke. Elsewhere its departure appears to be associated with the blood leaving a mortal wound.

Odd as it may sound, concepts such as ‘soul’ and even ‘psyche’ cannot easily be translated back into Homeric Greek. By the time of Plato, centuries after Homer, we are on relatively familiar ground: the ‘soul’ is the whole of our being which seems not to be bodily, the vehicle that bears our personality and memory as distinctively as one's body bears its thumbprint. But for Homer, if we have lived, we have lived through a body, not in a soul.

Hence by the standard of all later uses of the word, there is no soul in Homer. Home truth no. 10.

Homer's usage separates him here not only from modern thinkers, but also from other ancient writers and composers. In casting about for parallels to this curious Homeric way of thinking, the only one that has occurred to me over the years is in the American William James. He was an anatomist, and hence someone, like Homer, with a feeling for the fine structure of the body. I am not sure if medical education produces such people any more; physiology presumes to subsume anatomy—the distinction is between function and form—as though anatomy were an afterthought of its larger concerns. (Anthropology presumes to subsume linguistics in a similar, and equally false, way.)

In his *Principles of Psychology* James espouses a notion of correlation or correspondence. Like most moderns, he has a preoccupation with the brain, which was unusual in the ancient world. There, it is the chest and lungs that are the seat of consciousness; they are also the bellows that exhale the shapes of air that we call 'words'. Words are 'winged', according

to Homer's epithet, because they must fly across a material medium in order to impinge upon another human's sense apparatus, before they can penetrate his consciousness.

As James well understood, the transition from the physical to the cognitive in this process is not just difficult, but impossible to understand. His brain-fetish led him to formulate the principle in the following way: for every mental state there is a brain state, and vice versa. Ostensibly this proposition seems as though it could be empirically demonstrable; but James articulates it as a rational principle.

The claim might seem innocuous unless one sees it in its positive light. Correlation does not imply causation. The claim is in fact very strong: that nothing more can be said about the relation of mind to brain, except for this thoroughgoing correspondence. The whole of recent psychiatry depends upon a fundamentally opposite premise: that brain states cause mental states. It is certainly the case that the experience of joy can be correlated with a certain configuration and chemistry of the brain. What James understood, correctly, is that it is impossible to model theoretically—not

difficult but completely impossible in principle—the transition from chemistry to joy. Material can only affect material. It is possible to induce a certain chemistry in the brain, with drugs, and the lucky subject will more than likely feel joy. It is, all the same, an impossible fact. It is possible to induce the same brain chemistry by giving the subject good news. Good news also produces joy; how does this good news, translated at some point into packets of winged air, ever come into contact chemically with the nerve fibres of the brain?

One need only think about blushing to realise the fundamental quality of this conundrum, a mystery always under our noses that we avoid confronting or thinking through. How is a blush possible? What possible connection could there be between shame, and the flow of oxygenating blood in one's facial capillaries? It is impossible that there be one. And yet blushing is a fact. It is a fact that reminds us of the principle of correlation without causation, in the relation between the physical and the mental. Correlation seems to be the key to what is sometimes misleadingly called 'Homeric psychology'. James is a psychologist, because for all the peculiarities of his notions, in particular the 'stream of thought', he still

believes in the integrating consciousness. But Homer has the whole body for his canvas, when he tries to depict the human experience of consciousness. He is clearly fascinated by anatomy, in the way that this is disclosed by body armour, or by the penetration of a weapon. There is an erotic component to this fascination; when Achilles strips Hector naked, all Achilles' comrades admire Hector's beauty, and none fails to stab him with his spear.

When Homer wishes to depict an inner awareness or life, it would seem that he focalises the consciousness within certain organic seats, in particular the lungs and heart, the complex without which it would be impossible to produce a winged word. Hence what results can seem to us a thoroughgoing equivocation: the μένος is at once 'might' or 'rage,' and a fluid; the φρένα are the lungs, and the vessel of consciousness. I hope you agree with me that there is nothing 'primitive' about this. Indeed, what seems crude by contrast is the overwhelming presumption in favour of the integrated consciousness in almost all authors but Homer, and not only in the school of Greece.

What is the role of 'fate' in Homer's Iliad? My late teacher David Grene used to say that fate in ancient Greek usage was only ever about 95% certain. Home truth no. 11. That is to say, there was always that little bit of wiggle room, and hence a feeling of possibility and choice without which it would not be possible humanly to conceive of a worthy life. Without this feeling there is also not the possibility of meaningful and interesting narrative. But if Homer is not so simple-minded, or susceptible to such simple-minded criticism—as to say, we cannot discuss this or that bloke's choices, because for 'the Greeks' everything was fated—then what after all is the role of fate in Homer's plotting and in the lives of his protagonists? It is quite clear that Zeus is the strongest of the stronger powers in the world, the one who can pull the golden chain, but also that not even the father of gods and men is free to alter fate. Consider the pressures on the poor fellow. When he realizes that his dear son, Sarpedon, is about to be killed by Patroclus, he mourns out loud in the most personal way, and wonders whether he should spirit him away alive (XVI.433 ff.). Hera's response is worth mulling over. It is not, 'hey Zeusy, that's nice, but you know it's IMPOSSIBLE.' It is, rather, 'well well well ... all this fuss for a mortal ... okay, go ahead. But the rest of us gods aren't going to be too

happy about it.’ She goes on to point out what chaos would result if each of the gods decided to help out their particular favourites, protecting their lives from some kind of prearranged fate. ‘There are so many sons of immortals fighting around Priam’s town!’ She suggests, instead, that Sarpedon be allowed to die, but also that arrangements be made for the body to be returned to Lycia, where his family could prepare it and mourn properly. Zeus is eager to acquiesce. It is the thought of what a bureaucratic mess would be created that prevents the supreme power in the universe from saving his son. We all know this feeling of the bureaucratic nightmare. It is quite a puzzle to me how Homer knew this feeling, without the direct experience of modern politics and infrastructures. Is it really this mundane, bureaucratic inertia that preserves the machinery of fate? Yes, apparently. When Agamemnon declares to the troops after hearing the false dream in Book II that the army’s cause is hopeless, it is said that the Achaeans would have returned home in their ships *ὑπέρμολα*, ‘beyond fate,’ unless a chain of command from Hera through Athena to Odysseus had not reined them in. This notion that such and such would have happened ‘beyond fate’ but for the intervention of so and so, recurs through the poem; I would connect it to that affect of the brink of destruction that I mentioned earlier, a



feeling of the tension that something that is not supposed to happen is almost coming to pass, where one feels almost bodily the force that keeps what is fated on its proper track. Nothing ever happens in the *Iliad* beyond what is fated, despite the reality of the threat. It is as though there is a contract established between poet and audience, which allows her to draw on this affect in a state of peculiar epic pleasure. But note that in the opening speech of the *Odyssey*, Zeus announces that Aegisthus has achieved the murder of Agamemnon and the wiving of Clytaemnestra 'beyond fate'. Immediately a different contract has been drawn up, enabling perhaps a different kind of pleasure in that poem, and a radically different equation of the possibility in human agency.

The opening lines of the *Iliad* assert that the will of Zeus was being accomplished in the consequences of Achilles' anger. This βουλή Διός is a 'will' in the objective sense, an internal object of the verb βουλεύειν 'to advise' or 'counsel,' with which it is sometimes paired (as when in English we can 'walk a walk'). Hence the βουλή is a 'plan' or 'counsel,' rather than 'the will' which we tend to hypostatise as the faculty capable of the activity signified by the verb. One should perhaps be cautious about the

hypostasis; is it not like personifying Strife? It is after all this magical agent upon which the whole of the modern disquiet depends. How can we have a free will if there is such a thing as fate? Since the notion 'free' really adds nothing to the matter, the modern question is about the coexistence of will and fate (or determinism). But the question to be posed within Homer, which, it must be said, the poet raises rather directly with her aside in line 5, is what is the relation between this plan of Zeus's, presumably a result of his desire, and the anger of Achilles to which it is directly juxtaposed, on the one hand, and on the other, to fate, this looming notion that emerges with a steady persistence through the episodes in the narrative?

At first it seems the Homeric question is as intractable as the modern one, but I believe that there are important data for the problem in the word most often translated as 'fate'. This word is *μῶρος*, and properly it means 'part' or 'portion'. Sometimes the notion is figured as a piece of string that is cut by the three mythological spinners. But I think it is best served by an image that expresses the finitude of the available string—and really a cake or a pie works better. It is as if there is one big pie baked of the stuff of life, and each of us is allotted one share. This notion of the share, it seems to me, is

a key to understanding Homer's conception, in the way that it adds content to the notion of a predestined terminus to a string-like line of life.

What I would like to suggest is the notion of a 'budget,' in its fully political and modern sense, to give context to the notion of a share or portion that is the Homeric 'fate'. Just as in the case of a modern parliament, everything that ultimately becomes a part of the fateful budget begins life as an object of desire on the part of an agent, however broad-minded or craven the politician. I think it is fair to say that everything that comes to be fated in the *Iliad* began life as an object of desire, in the person of some god. To be sure, there is a Freudian over-determination in Homeric events; it is not that there is no explanation for why something happens, but rather, that there are too many. The anger of Achilles did all those terrible things, and also the will of Zeus was being accomplished, and oh, by the way, the whole thing was fated anyway. It is like the perfect aspect in the Greek verb: perfects show reduplication in the first syllable, a kappa infix, and distinctive endings. Some verbs show all three at once, when only one sign would be necessary to distinguish the perfect! Like our English double negatives. By the opening of the *Iliad*, the fall of Troy is quite obviously a fated thing, and

certainly an event already in the audience's past. But it is also quite obvious that Ilium would not have fallen had not Hera and Athena and their allies conceived a dreadful hatred for the place, and in particular for Priam and his sons. At the beginning of Book IV, Zeus wonders out loud if Hera would not eat Priam and his sons and all the Trojans raw, if she could get the chance. Zeus complains that Priam's city is his very favourite under sun and heaven. Hera makes a deal: give me Troy now, and some time you can have my favourites: Argos, Sparta and Mycenae (IV.52). What an extraordinary concession; how does one take it in the audience? One wonders if these citadels of the Achaeans were also part of the audience's past, and where they actually were.

The problem with a budget is that it cannot be changed in mid-stream. In the period prior to its passage, a budget is a field of endless conflict and negotiation. Anything is possible at that point. But once it is passed, nothing can be changed. Once the government offices or UN bureaus have received their annual allotment, they cannot ask for more. They can only petition for next year. (Think how sublime is the notion of 'discretionary spending'.) I think that this is the key to the power of fate. It is like this

year's budget, which was negotiated last year. Home truth no. 12. Consider how deeply the anxiety about this problem goes in the *Iliad*; it is in fact expressed in the opening conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon, which is essentially a problem of re-allotment once the division has already been made. The case is doubly poignant and humanly challenging because the commodity in question is a woman. Apart from the question about the value of a woman—as Chryseis is being loaded onto the ship that will take her home to father, so also are a hundred oxen, inviting a comparison of the value of the cargoes—it is not possible to return a woman. She has become 'used', to put it crudely. ('That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend his share of the offence, is, we know, not one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished ...'—Jane Austen.) It is essential to the possibility of reconciliation with Achilles, although it stretches credibility, that Agamemnon claims he has not in fact slept with Briseis. The whole narrative problem of the *Iliad*—a poet's discretionary spending, if you will, which is also a problem for Zeus's budget that causes him to have a sleepless night—is how to stitch in a certain sequence of action, within a framework that has already been determined. He already knows that Troy

is going to fall, and when it is going to fall. But Thetis has called in a favour; and he must deliver in such a way as to work within the confines of a fate that has already been budgeted. To some extent, I believe he makes things up as he goes along. He is shown doing this at XVI.644 ff., when he wonders whether Patroclus should die right there at Hector's hands, over Sarpedon's body, or whether he should get to rage on some more. (He decides on a little more action for Patroclus.) The flexibility here is striking, because in Book VIII we find out from Zeus's own mouth, for the first time, that Patroclus has to die as part of this favour for Thetis. Just because Zeus expresses it as a fated thing, does not mean that he had ever seen this before: he speaks in the modus of a prophet. But Zeus himself, the supremo, does not know precisely when the necessary death must occur. Similarly, in Book XV, when he wakes up from Hera's embrace, he announces for the first time, to us and to himself, that Hector also must die. His son Sarpedon will fall at Patroclus' hands, and Patroclus at Hector's, so that Achilles will finally be roused from the ships to seek revenge. This is the way that Thetis' favour will be completed. There will be a reversal, a *παλίωξις*, driving back from the ships to Ilium, to neutralise the retrogression in fate that was initiated by Thetis' request.

It is false to the letter and to the spirit of the story to say that Patroclus' and Hector's deaths were fated from the beginning. No such things were on the horizon until the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, and Thetis' visit to the knee of Zeus. Fate unfolds before us, at the very moments in VIII and XV that Zeus sees the pieces fall into place, and Homer himself there glimpses the horizons of his story. Perhaps we even feel a sense of achievement here, Zeus's successful achievement of a negotiation within the confines of fate, that is at the same time a narrative achievement; as we are also swept onward into the real-time mortality of Patroclus and Hector, the pathos of Achilles' surrogates.

At certain moments Zeus holds up the scales, and a man's fate tips in the balance. I am open to suggestions about the meaning of this, but it strikes me as a ratification rather than a decision. Judges do not like to feel like perpetrators of any kind, but as agents of justice. Zeus is no exception. Holding up the scales is a way of turning the messy motives that produce what is fated, into a matter of masses and weights; there is a distance in

the gesture that perhaps is a comfort to judge and jury. It seems to be a way of objectifying a decision, rather than an event in itself.

So is the most powerful figure in the universe a kind of hen-pecked American president, with Hillary in the wings, and Monica Lewinsky asking favours, who has to pass a budget through an unruly congress and then live with the consequences? Yes I think this is Homer's idea. What I don't understand is what experience Homer could possibly have had of this post-Enlightenment kind of government: for that is what Homer depicts in his Olympians, a government, of a kind very familiar to us. The question to ask is about the truth and the reality. Which of the competing stories that purport to take us 'behind the scenes' actually works, so as to answer to our experience of reality? Is what is behind the appearance of our will and agency a reality of impersonal forces, masses, energies and elements, whose implacable laws are the true determinants of what is real? Or behind the scenes is there a purpose or intelligence of some kind? Or is there a loving god with a personal stake in our welfare? Or perhaps a Universal Consciousness, to which we return in a sort of ultimate homecoming, but one in which we ourselves dissolve? Or rather, does the world actually



work as though its strongest power were a compromised president, where things happen as though they had been decided by a corruptible parliament, and the divinity of sex can overthrow the most stable fantasies of well-meaning people? It would be good to separate these answers, between the ones that are *wishes*, the ones that *comfort*, and the ones that are *true*.

I shall leave you with a question about Achilles. In the embassy in Book IX, in response to Odysseus' plea, he relates his mother's statement, that there are two κῆρες, winged death-spirits or fates, who are carrying him towards death. If he stays to fight around the Trojans' city, his return home will be lost, but his glory will be imperishable. But if he were to reach his dear home—the πατρὶς γαῖα, mother earth of his fathers—his glory is lost, but he will have a long life. In learning this from his mother, does he know something more than you and I do about fate? If so, what is it?