surrounding environs (sea, rivers, Mount Ida, etc.) – as Homer might possibly have envisaged it.

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Introduction

READING HOMER'S *ILIAD*

The *Iliad* is the first work of Western literature, a 15,000-line epic poem composed *c.* 700 BC, so called because it tells of an incident that occurred during the Greek siege of *Ilium*, a town in the region of *Troy* (modern north-west Turkey).*

A reader who wishes to sample it can use the summaries at the start of each book to keep abreast of the plot. Book 1, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, explains Achilles' anger and withdrawal from battle. The duel between Menelaus and *Hector* and the subsequent *APHRODITE*–*Paris*–Helen scene in Book 3 introduce the *Trojan* enemy and the reason for the Greek siege. The *Hector*–*Andromache* scene in Book 6 puts the *Trojan* hero *Hector* in perspective. Book 9 is central, because the *Iliad* hinges on Achilles' rejection here of Agamemnon's offer of reconciliation. The seduction of ZEUS in Book 14 shows Homer's touch at its lightest. At this point the epic becomes more and more centred on Achilles, as his personal tragedy unfolds. Books 16, 18 (the death of Patroclus and Achilles' decision to return to battle) and 22–24 (the death of *Hector*, Patroclus' burial and the return of *Hector*'s body) form the irreducible kernel.

* In this Introduction, please note that Trojan names and places are printed in italics (e.g. *Hector*); gods are in capitals (ZEUS), pro-Trojan gods in italic capitals (*APOLLO*). See pp. xli–xlvi for notes to the Introduction.

AN OUTLINE PLOT OF *THE ILIAD*

Trojan Paris seduced Menelaus' wife Helen and took her back to *Ilium*. Menelaus appealed to his brother Agamemnon, and together they raised an expedition to bring her back. The *Iliad* is set in the last year of the Greek siege of *Ilium* and begins with a quarrel.

Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expeditionary force, has been given as booty the daughter of a local priest of *APOLLO*. He is forced to return her and demands a replacement. After a furious quarrel with Achilles, he takes Briseis, Achilles' prize, prompting Achilles and his close companion Patroclus to walk out of the fighting. Achilles' divine mother THETIS wrings a promise out of ZEUS, king of the gods, that the Greeks will start to lose, so that Achilles will be welcomed back and the insult made good. This immediately causes trouble with ZEUS' wife HERA, who supports the Greeks (Book 1).

In Books 2–8, Homer lays the immediate quarrel aside and presents the broader picture – the Greek and *Trojan* combatants on earth, and the gods on Olympus. We see Agamemnon testing the morale of the troops and making a fool of himself (2); *Trojan Paris* defeated in a duel with Menelaus, but saved by his patron goddess *APHRODITE* (3); the gods most hostile to *Troy*, HERA and ATHENE, getting the fighting started again (4); the Greek hero Diomedes routing the *Trojans*, and even wounding *APHRODITE* and the war-god *ARES* (5); *Troy*'s greatest fighter *Hector* in moving conversation with his wife *Andromache* and their child (6); *Hector* fighting an inconclusive duel with Ajax, and the Greeks building a defensive wall and ditch (7); and ZEUS tipping the scales in favour of the *Trojans*, who drive the Greeks right back behind their new defences and camp out for the night on the plain (8).

Agamemnon now acknowledges that he was wrong to insult Achilles and agrees to send an embassy to him with massive compensation to beg him to return. Odysseus, Phoenix and Ajax lead the embassy, but to their amazement Achilles rejects them. Achilles' tragedy begins here (Book 9).

In Books 10–15, we see Homer preparing the groundwork for the fatal entry of Patroclus, Achilles' close companion, into battle. Diomedes and Odysseus go on a night expedition into the *Trojan* camp and steal the famous horses of *Rhesus* (10); Agamemnon enjoys a brief solo feat of arms, but the Greeks are driven back. Achilles sends Patroclus to find out what is happening, and wise old Nestor suggests to Patroclus that, if Achilles will not return to the fighting, Patroclus might, dressed in Achilles' armour (11). Meanwhile the *Trojans* force home their attack on the Greek defences. Part of the parapet is torn away; *Hector* smashes down the gate and the *Trojans* pour through (12). ZEUS, assuming the *Trojans* will now win, turns his attention elsewhere, and POSEIDON takes the opportunity to rally the Greeks (13). HERA keeps ZEUS occupied by making love to him. The *Trojans* are routed (14). ZEUS wakes up and, enraged, threatens the gods with violence if they intervene any more. POSEIDON withdraws, *APOLLO* destroys the Greek defences and *Hector* leads the *Trojans* right up to the Greek ships (15).

Patroclus now returns to Achilles and repeats Nestor's suggestion that he go into battle dressed in Achilles' armour. Achilles (fatally) agrees. In a great solo feat of arms Patroclus drives the *Trojans* right back, but is stripped of his armour by *APOLLO* and killed by *Hector* (Book 16). A fierce battle breaks out over Patroclus' body, and *Hector* dons Patroclus' (i.e. Achilles') armour. The Greeks retreat with Patroclus' body (Book 17). Achilles hears about Patroclus' death, acknowledges it is entirely his fault and announces that he will have his revenge on *Hector*. THETIS tells him he will die immediately afterwards, and Achilles accepts the price. Herein lies his tragedy. HEPHAESTUS makes new armour for Achilles, including the famous shield (Book 18).

Agamemnon and Achilles are reconciled and the gifts delivered to Achilles, who is now urgent for revenge on *Hector* (Book 19). He goes on such a murderous rampage that POSEIDON has to save *Aeneas* from him, and *APOLLO* whisks *Hector* away to safety too (Book 20). The River-god tries to drown Achilles because he has blocked up the River's

channels with the dead; even the gods fall to fighting each other (Book 21).

Achilles isolates *Hector* and kills him. Against all custom, he keeps and mutilates the body (Book 22). Patroclus is cremated, and Achilles holds funeral games (Book 23). Still unable to reconcile himself to events, Achilles drags *Hector*'s body futilely round Patroclus' grave-mound. The gods agree Achilles has gone too far and arrange for *Hector*'s father *Priam*, King of Troy, to supplicate Achilles for the return of *Hector*'s body. In the night encounter in Achilles' quarters, old *Priam* succeeds. The *Iliad* ends with laments for *Hector*, and his burial (Book 24).

The *Iliad* ends there, but Homer has still left us with a clear notion of what the immediate future holds – death for Achilles and destruction for *Ilium*.

THE FOCUS OF *THE ILIAD*

As Aristotle saw, Homer decided not to work through the whole Trojan War year by year, but to direct the action of the epic round a single theme – the anger of Achilles announced in the first line of the epic, which brought endless sufferings to his own side (as Homer at once points out) and ultimately himself. As a result, the *Iliad* is distinguished by a tight economy of action. For example, four-fifths of the action occurs on a mere four days and intervening nights (the whole of Books 11–18 takes place over only twenty-four hours). The story centres round the aristocratic heroes, not the general mass of troops. Very many heroes are named, but Homer selects about twenty characters in all from both sides to concentrate on (including *Trojan* women). The human action takes place either in or around the Greek camp on the beach, or in *Ilium*, or on the battlefield, while the divine action takes place on Mount Olympus or one of the mountains around *Troy*, for example *Mount Ida* (see map 1). Nor are the Greeks and *Trojans* significantly differentiated by Homer. For the sake of the story they worship the same gods, speak the same language and share the same assumptions and

values. Both armies desire to end the war and live with their families at home, in peace, though the Greeks, as aggressors on a mission, come over as more single-minded than the *Trojans*, defending their homes, for whom there is more to life than battle.

At the same time, however, Homer creates the impression that he is covering the whole war, and even the periods before and after it. In the course of the *Iliad*, for example, and quite outside the time-frame of the story itself, we learn that the goddess THETIS married the mortal Peleus, producing Achilles. Homer gives us a charming picture of Achilles as a baby, an insight into his education, and how his close companion Patroclus – so crucial to the *Iliad* – came to live in his household.

Further, we are told that *Paris*, handsome son of *Priam*, selected *APHRODITE* as the winner of the golden apple – Homer does not mention the apple – and was granted as his reward the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, wife of Menelaus, ruler of Sparta in Greece. On a visit to Sparta, *Paris* broke all rules of hospitality, seduced Helen and took her back to *Ilium*, much to the disgust of his brother *Hector*, *Troy*'s greatest fighter. Menelaus then appealed to his brother Agamemnon, and together they raised an expedition to retrieve Helen. To judge from Homer's catalogue of ships, it consisted of 29 contingents led by 44 commanders from 175 Greek localities in 1,186 ships containing (one may guess) 100,000 men. The expedition set off with favourable omens.[1]

We are informed that, when the expedition landed in *Troy*, Protesilaus was the first man killed as he leapt ashore; that Menelaus and Odysseus tried to settle the matter by negotiation; that they were rejected – one *Trojan* even thought Menelaus should be murdered then and there – and for nine long years the Greeks laid siege to *Ilium*, without success. Homer looks back to a few incidents from this period, but there was really very little to say about it. He could not construct a convincing epic for a Greek audience about the Greeks' nine-year *inability* to take *Troy*. Nor could any Greek: all other accounts of the Trojan War struggle to fill these years convincingly.

There is, however, one exception. The seeds of Homer's *Iliad* lie in events which took place immediately before the story starts – the Greek raids led by Achilles on neighbouring *Trojan* towns for the purpose of aggrandizement. Two significant towns catch Homer's especial attention: *Thebe*, where Achilles captured the girl *Chryseis* over whose ownership the *Iliad* begins; and *Lyrnessus*, where Achilles captured his favourite woman *Briseis*. Further, Homer lays emphasis on the division of spoils that took place after such raids, and the resentment Achilles felt at its unfairness.[2]

The *Iliad*, in other words, seems to cover much more than a few days during the last year of the Trojan War. In the first work of Western literature, we find an economy and focus combined with a breadth of vision that have informed narrative literature ever since.

THE CENTRAL THEME OF *THE ILIAD*

The purpose of this section is to re-run the *Iliad* and offer some sense of the main issues underlying the narrative. At its heart, the epic raises for Achilles the question 'What is a man's life worth?'. Three preliminary points must be made.

First, battle is sometimes described in Homer as the place 'where men win glory' and, in a trivial sense, the glory of the Homeric hero bears comparison with that of a modern professional sportsman: both perform in the public arena, nothing else counts but winning, and the purpose of the exercise is to gain wealth and respect. So victory and its rewards, material and social, are the Homeric heroes' priorities, the ultimate ambition being *kleos*, fame that stays with you after death; while judgement of success or failure lies in the first place with one's peers, not with any internalized sense of self-worth (which does not mean heroes do not have that sense – Achilles certainly does). Defeat and insult are both taken extremely badly.

Second, heroes are complex and richly characterized humans, not unthinking fighting machines. They would far rather not have to fight at all. *Hector* freely acknowledges that Achilles is

a better fighter than he is. Diomedes can absorb an insult when it is not deserved, because he knows what he is capable of (but he does not forget it). But most of all, since in the martial world of the *Iliad* failure usually means death, fighting is not glorified for its own sake. *ARES* is the most hateful of gods, and war is described with a whole range of painful epithets ('with all its tears', etc.). The heroes do not want to die. Time and again Homer emphasizes their desire to return home, to the family. Battle is a means to an end, a way of life that gives them the chance to win a reputation among their fellows and longed-for immortal glory, but as the moving *Hector–Andromache* scene shows, it is set within a larger human framework.[3]

Finally, we must not entertain the idea that the Greek army is like a modern army, with a clear command structure which automatically makes disobedience to Agamemnon 'wrong'. Agamemnon is acknowledged as overall leader of the expedition by virtue of the number of troops he brought with him, but as the constant debates make clear, authority is not taken for granted: it is demonstrated by the ability to win an argument and to persuade the rest to acquiesce (whence the requirement for heroes to be effective speakers as well as fighters). Only on Olympus is there an undisputed master who can command automatic obedience – ZEUS – and that, in the end, is down to his sheer physical superiority.

The problem Achilles faces is that he is fated to live only a short life and therefore knows he has little time in which to earn eternal fame. So life to him seems peculiarly intense, and when in Book 1 Agamemnon says that he may well take Achilles' girl *Briseis* in place of *Chryseis*, that is serious enough for a man like Achilles, known for his love of a quarrel, to threaten to abandon the army. His argument is set out at 1.149–171: (i) The *Trojans* never did me any harm, (ii) we are fighting for Menelaus' and Agamemnon's honour, but (iii) while I do all the fighting, I am given minimal reward, and (iv) now Agamemnon proposes to take away even what I have been given.

Agamemnon's response precipitates Achilles' exit: he both urges Achilles to leave the fighting and assures him that he will certainly take *Briseis*. In other words, Agamemnon is

announcing before the whole army that Achilles, their greatest fighter, is surplus to his and the expedition's requirements, and that he (Agamemnon) will do precisely what he likes with Achilles' hard-won property. It is this violent, public, unjust and therefore deeply humiliating attack on Achilles' assessment of his importance to the Greek army, followed by Agamemnon's seizure of what is his by rights, that drives Achilles to contemplate killing Agamemnon, an act from which ATHENE barely restrains him. It is significant that no Greek objects to Achilles walking out: Agamemnon is clearly in the wrong and later admits it.[4]

But in Book 9, when Agamemnon relents and agrees to offer compensation, Achilles' position has changed. There is now nothing that will induce him to fight. He repeats to the embassy the original accusation that he does all the fighting and Agamemnon gets all the rewards; but now he goes further. No material compensation can pay him back, because all the compensation in the world cannot equal the worth of one's life.

The embassy is stunned by this response, and has every right to be: if Achilles will not accept compensation, offered through the mediation of those who are his closest friends, what will he accept? This is simply not the way the material-oriented heroic world works. The leadership is equally stunned when it hears of the failure of the mission. Diomedes, however, points out that the embassy was always going to be a waste of time; Achilles has never been anything but his own man; he will fight when he wants to, and there is nothing that can be done about it. Diomedes is right, as is Achilles' companion Patroclus, who later points out that, since a hero is supposed to benefit his people, Achilles' angry absence from battle serves no purpose: 'You and your disastrous greatness – what will future generations have to thank you for, if *you* do nothing to prevent the Greeks' humiliating destruction?'

Diomedes sees that Achilles is not dissatisfied with the theory of material compensation for wrongs suffered. He is just being Achilles. If Achilles knew what he wanted to induce him back to the fighting, all he had to do was to say: the embassy would have promised it at once (and, incidentally, the *Iliad* would have ended there). But all he knows is that Agamemnon must 'pay back the whole heart-rending insult'. No member of the embassy enquires what he means by this. They are doing all they can, and Achilles is not interested. No wonder Aristotle calls Achilles 'a good man, but a paradigm of obstinacy'.[5]

But if the consequences for the Greeks are bad, they are catastrophic for Achilles. His decision not to rejoin the fighting is the beginning of the end for him. It is the first of a sequence of decisions he now takes in full confidence that he has judged the situation correctly, when in fact he has got it all utterly, and ultimately tragically, wrong. In Book 11, he feels the Greeks really will beg him to return now. But they do not. In Book 16, when *Hector* sets fire to a ship, Achilles agrees that Patroclus should go out to fight in his place to avert the immediate crisis: that, he feels, should solve the problem. He is wrong: *Hector* kills Patroclus. In Book 18 Achilles decides to avenge Patroclus' death. That at least should bring satisfaction. It does not: killing *Hector* achieves nothing for Achilles' state of mind. The burial of Patroclus and the funeral games at least bring some sense of reconciliation with Agamemnon, yet Achilles still cannot sleep and continues to mutilate *Hector*. But over-riding all of these considerations is the grim consequence of his decision to avenge Patroclus' death: it will mean his own death soon after, and he takes the decision in the full knowledge that this is the case. Some tragedies take a man unawares. *Hector* is one such: it is only at the end that *Hector* realizes his time has come, though we have been alert to it well before that. Patroclus is another (though in true tragic fashion Book 16 is full of ironies and markers of his impending doom which none but the audience can see). Achilles looks his tragedy full in the face and does not flinch.[6]

What is a man's life worth? Achilles gives his answer in Book 18 – a man's life is worth revenge on the person who killed his beloved companion. It is in many ways a horrifying decision: Achilles is signing his own death warrant. But it is also in many ways a more than heroic one. The Homeric world of material compensation and heroic status, such critical issues for Achilles back in Book 1, seems far away. Achilles chooses to die not

primarily to win everlasting glory (though he hopes his feat of arms will achieve this), but because he holds himself responsible for Patroclus' death.

Nevertheless, even the immediate consequences for Achilles are grim: self-willed lover of conflict he may have been already, but the poet goes out of his way to emphasize how far he plunges off the scale of human normality as he seeks this single-minded revenge. He becomes maddened, almost bestial, in his desire for it, and the gods agree: Achilles is like a lion, destroying pity and knowing no shame.

In his deranged state, it is little wonder that revenge brings Achilles no comfort. This is what makes Book 24 so remarkable. Consumed by his desire for revenge but confronted by its failure to resolve his anguish, Achilles ends his assault on the body of the dead *Hector* and returns it to his father *Priam*. But this is no last-minute conversion, no sudden seeing of the light, even though ZEUS assures THETIS that returning the body will bring Achilles glory. Achilles knows it is ZEUS' will, and that he has no option. Further, his famous speech of consolation to *Priam* is more 'counselling' than consolation. He sees their tragedies jointly intertwined. Life, says Achilles, is at best a mixture of good and ill, as it has been for both *Priam* and Achilles' father Peleus: by Achilles' efforts *Priam*, a father, has lost his son *Hector*; by these same efforts Achilles has lost Patroclus, and his father Peleus will shortly have lost *his* son too. But there is also an extraordinary moment when *Priam* and Achilles gaze on each other in admiration – as if *Priam* sees something of *Hector* in the man who slaughtered his beloved son, and Achilles something of the old, lonely Peleus – soon to be yet more lonely – in the father of his worst enemy. Surely here we sense that there is more to life than revenge, more to manhood than the slaughter of men.

Here, then, in the West's first work of literature, we see the intensive literary exploitation of a great human theme which seems to touch us all, however particular (and alien) the setting. It is not so much about what happens – the action is very limited – as what is going on in the mind of its central figure, Achilles. It will be a model for much future literature.

The *Iliad* is also the world's first tragedy. Two hundred years before the Greek tragic poets invented the medium for the stage, Homer had grasped its essential nature in the figure of Patroclus (see above, and note 6) and even more of Achilles – an initially wronged hero, of divine ancestry, who finds his world inexplicably turning to ashes as a result of the decisions he has freely, if intemperately, taken, whose greatness lies in his refusal to disclaim the responsibility for his actions, even though his own death will be the inevitable consequence.[7]

THE GODS

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus argued that Homer (and Hesiod, a near contemporary epic poet who composed *Theogony*, 'The Birth of the Gods') gave the Greeks their divinities.[8] His point was that, from time immemorial, gods had been worshipped, through ritual, as faceless powers representing almost any aspect of human existence (see 'Personification' in Appendix 1), who needed appeasing in order to stop them acting against humans with all the blind, irresistible force of (say) gravity. But Homer and Hesiod for the first time gave gods an individual, human face and made a community out of them, informing us of their birth, family relationships, character and everyday activities.

This humanness of the gods is evident in the most mundane details. ZEUS is their head, and they quarrel, as all families do. They have a daily life. After a hard day's work they enjoy an evening meal (ambrosia) and drink (nectar), tease each other, listen to the entertainment, and go to bed with their wives in their houses on Olympus. Even more amazing, these immortals do things during the day which frequently bring them nothing but pain, notably battling on behalf of their mortal favourites. The queen of Olympus, HERA, comments on the sweat she expended assembling the Greek army to attack *Troy*; *APHRODITE* complains that the Greek hero Diomedes has wounded her on the wrist (ZEUS smiles and tells her to concentrate on the pleasures of the marriage-bed); *ARES* the war-god

complains that Diomedes has stabbed him in the belly (ZEUS tells him to stop whining).[9]

Gods in Homer have their favourites and regularly interact with humans in the *Iliad*, usually without disguise.[10] *APHRODITE*, for example, was goddess of the force we associate with sexual desire, and since *Paris* selected her as the winner of the golden apple, she gave him Helen and supported him and the *Trojans* throughout the *Iliad*. Nevertheless, there could be tension in such relationships. Here, for example, *APHRODITE* has instructed Helen to return from the battlements and make love to *Paris*. Helen refuses:

'No, go and sit with him yourself. Forget you are a goddess. Never set foot on Olympus again but go and agonize over Paris, go and pamper him, and one day he may make you his wife – or his concubine. I refuse to go and share that man's bed again – it would be quite wrong. There is not a woman in Troy who would not blame me if I did. I have enough trouble to put up with already.'

This is quite remarkable. Helen is not afraid to argue with a very goddess, and in the most abrasive terms. She speaks as woman to woman. If we associate ancient gods with the mysterious, the numinous, the irrational or the terrifying, Helen's response to *APHRODITE* does not suggest she feels this way about the goddess.[11] But the situation changes abruptly with *APHRODITE*'s reply:

Enraged, celestial Aphrodite spoke to her:

'Obstinate wretch! Don't get the wrong side of me, or I may desert you in my anger and detest you as vehemently as I have loved you up till now, and provoke Greeks and Trojans alike to such hatred of you that you would come to a dreadful end.'

So she spoke, and Helen, child of Zeus, was terrified. She wrapped herself up in her shining white robe and went off in silence. (3.406–20)

APHRODITE's reply speaks for itself. No human crosses a god. Gods, in other words, work to extremes. They love you or hate you, support you or disown you, are close or distant.[12] It

is part of the magic of Homer that he is so effortlessly able, like Mozart, to reconcile the intimate with the divine.[13]

Whatever their relationship with their favourites, however, Homer's gods are immortal and all-powerful and, ultimately, will brook no effort by mortals to threaten their superiority. They can be utterly ruthless: *APOLLO* mercilessly strips Patroclus so that he can be killed, HERA easily barters away her three favourite towns if only *Troy* is destroyed. They can also be kind, like IRIS comforting the old king *Priam*; they can be magnificent, like POSEIDON racing across the waters on his chariot.

Yet even the gods must acknowledge ZEUS as their master: when he nods, Olympus shakes and his will is determined, however much they may try to resist it. So if humans *talk* about, and to, the gods in almost off-hand terms, as if gods were just other, rather more powerful human beings, Homer knows there is more to them than that. When he describes gods in the third-person narrative, they can be majestic beings. For all their occasional triviality, Homer provided the Greeks with a vision that, particularly in the person of ZEUS, could eventually translate into a principle of order, and even monotheism.[14]

Nevertheless, one can see why many serious-minded later thinkers (like Plato[15]) took such exception to Homer's treatment of the gods. It is worth quoting here the famous conclusion of an ancient critic we know as Longinus (first century AD?): 'in relating the gods' wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, imprisonments and manifold misfortunes, Homer, or so it seems to me, has done his best to make the men of the Trojan War gods, and the gods men.'[16] Longinus finds this shocking and explains that the behaviour of the gods must therefore be interpreted allegorically. This was a common response to Homer from as early as the fifth century BC and became even more so in the Christian era when the church acknowledged the primacy of Graeco-Roman education but had to find some way of turning pagan gods into good Christians.

As for destiny, or fate, it is important to remember that, in the absence of sacred scriptures and so of dogma, Greeks were not theologians. For Homer, fate was a purely literary device

which he summoned or shelved as he saw fit: it was the will of the poet. By the same token, Homer assigned responsibility for men's actions to both divine will and human impulse at the same time.[17] He could not distinguish between the two (any more than we can): it is as if men and gods were both fully responsible for what happened.

These features generate a sharp sense of human vulnerability and greatness. The epic is being recited by a third-person, omniscient narrator, Homer. He always tells us, his audience, what is happening on Olympus (the comparison with Greek tragedy, where in the absence of the omniscient narrator the world is far more bleak and unknowable, is marked). But his heroes, for the most part, have no idea. This contrast generates pathos, as frail humans battle, without complaint and often with glorious confidence, against these impossible odds. Their deaths in particular can be very moving. Even the gods weep.[18] Perhaps more important, the story is elevated out of the particular and takes on a more general human significance. War between heroes on the battlefield of *Troy* somehow seems to stand for life itself, in all its glory and hopelessness.

POETRY AND HISTORY, FACT AND FICTION: WAS THERE A TROJAN WAR?

Homeric poetry is oral in style (see next section) and its language is of ancient origin. As a result, it is likely that epic poetry was handed down by oral poets from as early as late bronze-age Greece, the so-called 'Mycenaean' age which ended *c.* 1100 BC. That may explain how Homer (*c.* 700 BC) appears to 'know' about bronze armour, for example, and fighting from chariots, unknown in Homer's day, and can describe a city like Mycenae as 'rich in gold' (which indeed it was in the late bronze age, but not in his). It is not, then, impossible, that details of a war between Greeks and *Trojans* round *Ilium* could have been passed down too. This is one of the grounds on which scholars have claimed to find history in Homer.

Unfortunately, we cannot conclude from this that the *Iliad* contains a specific history of a specific Trojan War. First, oral epic poets were not ancient historians, working from historical sources (let alone a text). Homeric epic in fact contains no historical understanding of the Mycenaean world at all: one would never guess from Homer, for example, that writing (Linear B) was used in the bronze age to record the workings of an economically complex, palace-based society.

Second, the end to which oral epic poets worked was the depiction of heroism in action – the winning of glory and fame through warfare and adventure, and the problems this raised. Homer is not unique in this. For example, the Babylonian epic of *Gilgamesh* (far older than Homer) bears some striking general and specific resemblances to the *Iliad*, e.g. Achilles and Gilgamesh are both sons of goddesses; both lose their dearest companions; both are devastated by their loss and take extreme action to try to compensate for it; and so on.[19] Again, it is a universal characteristic of such story-telling to be influenced by the subject-matter and story patterns of folklore and myth. Herodotus already pointed out the folklore nature of the *Iliad* when he argued that no king in real life would ever allow his city to be sacked, his children to be killed and his people to be destroyed because his son had returned home with a foreign female.[20]

Third, the Homers of the Greek world recreated living stories for contemporary audiences by age-old techniques of oral composition common to all heroic poetry, i.e. by stringing together typical sequences of 'themes'. For example, the first book of the *Iliad* contains an introduction, a supplication, a prayer, a divine visitation, summoning and dismissing an assembly, a journey by ship, a sacrifice, meals and entertainment, all entirely common to this type of composition. If one added arming/dressing, various types of battle-scene, messenger-scenes, reception-scenes, omens and sleeping, one would have covered the basic compositional elements of the *Iliad*.[21]

As a result of these sorts of considerations, one could conclude that the whole *Iliad* is invented: the Greeks never did attack

Ilium, and there was no tradition of singing about a Trojan War in bronze-age Greece. But even if there is some truth to a Greek attack on *Ilium*, it is highly likely that four hundred years of oral story-telling obliterated any serious record of it. As for the antique gloss – chariots and bronze armour and so on – poets had an interest in making their poems seem old and authoritative; it may be the gloss was added by the poets themselves. Consequently, many scholars argue that Homer's *Iliad* is much more the creation of contemporary and near-contemporary eighth-century BC culture. It was a response to the demands of a Greek audience of Homer's time who inhabited the region known to Greeks as Ionia, to the south of *Troy* (see map 3: this is why, of course, there are so few *Trojan* place-names in that area). For some reason, now irrecoverable, they wanted an epic about Greek dealings with their neighbours to the north. Homer, drawing on all the resources of oral poetry, gave them one.[22]

Yet this surely cannot be the *whole* story. Even if the *Iliad* is essentially fiction, fiction does not preclude history. After all, novels are fictions but they usually try to evoke a real world, and the real world, at least of Homer's day, looms large throughout the poem. For example, the economic background to the *Iliad* is agricultural, as it was for the whole of the ancient world (and indeed the modern world till the Industrial Revolution). Like the farmers of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod, warriors made their living from the land. Homer does nothing to disguise this world, which constantly emerges even in the heat of battle.[23] Pasturing herds is the real work of the day, and a hero may even come across a nymph while out in the fields, as *Bucolion* did, or some goddesses, as both *Paris*' and *Aeneas*' father *Anchises* did; less fortunately, he may meet a rampant Achilles, as *Andromache*'s brothers did. Diomedes raises horses, *Andromache* personally feeds *Hector*'s, *Pandarus* paints a moving picture of how he looks after his, *Priam* accuses his sons of being sheep- and cattle-thieves and himself rolls in the dung of the courtyard when he hears of *Hector*'s death. 'Shepherd of the people' is a common epithet for these heroes, values are assessed in worth of oxen and the fighting is constantly being likened to farmers defending their livestock against wild animals. The world of the heroes 'back home' is that of the farmer, and it is a proud calling. This is a constant and realistic background to the *Iliad*'s primarily martial, heroic world.[24]

Consider, too, the political implications of Homer's depiction of the Greek army at *Troy*: at one moment it seems to be one united 'people', at another a loose confederation of troops drawn from contingents from all over Greece, whose leaders are in constant conflict with each other to win prestige. If this is a fair description, the army's situation may well reflect Homer's contemporary world, in which old-style, landed aristocrats continued to compete among themselves as a more 'democratic' city-state world began slowly to emerge.

Homer, then, hardly surprisingly, reflects his own world. If therefore one wishes to contend that he also reflects, in some measure, a past world, even one in which a Graeco-*Trojan* conflict did actually take place, one would have to argue that it is surely too much of a coincidence that Homer just happened to guess correctly when he described heroes living in walled palaces, carrying bronze weapons, wearing bronze armour and shin-guards, and fighting from chariots, or that Mycenae was rich in gold (7.180, 11.46). One could then add to the case with reference to his Greek 'catalogue of ships' and list of *Trojan* contingents at the end of Book 2, which do seem to present a picture of a world bearing some resemblance to the bronze-age period (see maps 3 and 5 defining the areas from which the various contingents listed in the catalogues come).

Finally, one could point out that archaeologists have uncovered a flourishing town in the region Homer calls *Troy* (and we call the *Troad*, maps 1, 2). The mound in that area, named Hisarlik in Turkish and excavated by the adventurer and fantasist Heinrich Schliemann from 1870 to 1890,[25] was certainly identified by later Greeks and Romans with Homer's *Ilium*, as one can tell from the monuments they left there. Archaeology shows this town was subject to attack and siege around 1200 BC and also that it was in contact with bronze-age Greeks; and it is interesting that the fifth-century BC Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides date the Trojan War to round about that same period by counting back generations

(some of which are, admittedly, mythical). Nor is Hisarlik too small to have been besieged for ten years, as seemed to be the case till recently. It now appears that Schliemann uncovered merely the citadel. New excavations have been interpreted to mean that the town was ten times larger than first thought: it extended to the south and was defended by a substantial ditch.

All that makes a respectable case for evidence of the deep past in Homer – but again, one has to ask whether it makes a case for a Homeric Trojan war? Opponents of the 'Trojan war' scenario would reply that there is no evidence of any sort that any attack on Hisarlik was ever carried out by Greeks. They would agree that the *Iliad* contains references to the geography of the *Troad* area, suggesting the poet knew it well (e.g. 9.5, 12.10–33), and that *Ilium* as Homer describes it may bear some resemblance to Hisarlik, but they would object that this tells us nothing about the historicity of the epic. Homer needed an ancient site for the battle: Hisarlik may have provided a perfect model for his imagination to work on. Nor does Homer provide us with enough evidence to suggest that he had a late bronze-age view of the area round Hisarlik, whose coastline had altered radically by Homer's time, as core-drilling reveals. Certainly Homer presents a broad mental picture of what he thought the *Trojan* battlefield looked like, which Andrew Morley has made his best guess at representing (map 1), but that is not evidence for a Trojan War. (It is worth pointing out here that there will always be arguments about where the poet mentally envisaged the Greek camp and ships to be. Some place them to the north, along the shore of the Hellespont; others to the west, along the Aegean shore.)

On the balance of evidence at the moment, then, we may conclude that Homer's poetry can be linked with a tradition of oral poetry that existed in the Mycenaean age. But the *Iliad* represents what Homer *thought* the heroic world should have looked like: in other words, he took what the tradition offered him and shaped it into the *Iliad* we have today, in accordance with his own cultural assumptions and narrative priorities as an oral epic poet. To that extent, the question whether there really was a Trojan War is irrelevant to Homer's purposes. If there was one, we must find primary evidence for it outside the *Iliad*. Who knows? Such evidence may indeed emerge, at some time in the future.

But whatever conclusions we wish to draw about the extent to which our *Iliad* might reflect anything that happened around Hisarlik in the thirteenth century BC, we must end by pointing out that Hisarlik itself was an important location at that time in its own right. The core-drilling referred to above has revealed the existence of a bay at that time reaching north from the Dardanelles to Hisarlik (as Morley's representation shows). Since the entrance to the Dardanelles from the Aegean was hampered especially at this point by adverse currents and winds, Hisarlik would have made the perfect harbour in which to shelter. Hisarlik also traded widely in metalwork and textiles, and bred horses (hence those 'horse-taming Trojans'). All this accounts for its great wealth, which can be judged from its fine walls and '*Priam*'s treasure'.[26] Like Constantinople, it was defensible and could have controlled shipping on a major east–west route. So, in the thirteenth century BC, it was a place of strategic importance and certainly did have links with the Greek world.[27]

But, unlike Constantinople, it was unable to maintain its position. The rivers *Scamander* and *Simoïs* slowly silted it up. By Roman times, because of the presumed Homeric connection, it had largely become a tourist attraction.[28]

SOME TECHNICALITIES OF ORAL POETRY

In the 1920s, the American Milman Parry demonstrated that Homeric poetry was oral in style. This meant, first, that it was traditional, developed over hundreds of years of story-telling; indeed, it is clear that much of Homer's language is so ancient that neither he nor we can be certain about the meanings of some of the words he used (see p. lxiv). Second, it meant that it was the sort of poetry that could be composed by professional, trained poets, in performance, without the help of writing.

Since the metre in which Homeric poetry was composed is very complex, the training of poets like Homer must have consisted of listening to and learning from other poets fluent in the medium. To put it rather crudely, the fledgling poet must have somehow got at his fingertips thousands of almost pre-packaged but still flexible phrases, sentences and even whole scenes which fitted the metre and which had, over centuries of story-telling, turned out to be indispensable for the on-the-spot construction of long epic poems.

This accounts for all the verbal repetitions in Homer: everything from 'glorious *Hector*' through 'swift-footed godlike Achilles' to 'he thudded to the ground, and his armour clattered about him'. About a fifth of Homer is, in fact, repeated. It also accounts for the patterns of action that recur again and again, the building-blocks of scene construction that are also part of the oral poet's 'kit'. Scenes of arrival, for example, are structured as follows: A sets off; A arrives; A finds B; B is doing something; others are doing things too; A speaks.[29] Battle-scenes too follow regular patterns, for example (i) A does not kill B, B kills A (B here is always a Greek), (ii) A misses B, B hits but does not penetrate, A kills B (A here is always Greek), (iii) A misses B but kills C.[30]

Again, an oral poet, working without writing, has to learn how to keep a grip on his story-line, and one way Homer does this is by the device known as 'ring-composition'. Here Menelaus protects Patroclus' body:

> Warlike Menelaus son of Atreus did not fail to notice that Patroclus had been overcome in battle by the Trojans. He advanced through the front ranks, bronze armour glittering, and stood over Patroclus' body as a mother-cow stands protectively over the first calf she has brought into the world. So auburn-haired Menelaus stood over Patroclus and guarded the body with his spear and round shield, determined to kill anyone who advanced against him. (17.1–9)

Homer describes Menelaus in terms of a mother-cow protecting her calf. But he begins it by saying Menelaus 'stood over Patroclus' body as . . .' and ends it by saying 'So auburn-haired Menelaus stood over Patroclus . . .'. This is 'ring-composition' – repeating words or ideas to get the poet back to where he was when he started. Sometimes there are two or three rings, usually repeated in reverse order: in the above example, 'bronze armour glittering' might be picked up by 'with his spear and round shield'. One might even then argue for a third ring, though it does involve a change of person – 'Menelaus advanced . . .' being picked up by 'anyone who advanced against it'. This would give us three rings – a (advance), b (armour), c (stood) – picked up in reverse order by (c) stood, (b) armour, (a) advance.

Very many descriptions and similes (i.e. digressions in general) are structured in this way. So too are speeches.[31]

HOMER'S NARRATIVE STANCE

Our last sight of Achilles is of him asleep in the arms of *Briseis*, the woman Agamemnon took from him to start the trouble. It is a poignant farewell to the central figure of the *Iliad*, but it is typical of Homer that he does no more than describe the moment: 'But Achilles slept in a corner of his well-made hut; and fair-cheeked *Briseis* slept beside him' (24.675–6). Generally speaking, Homer in his role as third-person narrator simply reports. He does not comment, evaluate or tell us how to respond. That is why Homer is sometimes called 'restrained' or even 'objective', as if (to use a modern analogy) he were nothing but a camera, dispassionately surveying the scene without making any judgement upon it.

In fact, of course, Homer is as subjective as any camera since he carefully selects the scenes he wishes to survey and the angle from which he views them; further, he is free to control in any way he wishes what his characters do and say to each other, and how they react and interact. It is in the speeches especially that moral positions are taken and evaluative language deployed. But that does not alter the main point: that Homer himself does not obviously impose his views on us by using his privileged position as third-person narrator to push us into one response or another. He lets the characters speak for themselves and

keeps himself in the background. He rarely puts thoughts into people's minds or interprets mental states. Homer's practice can be strongly contrasted with that of the Roman poet Virgil, for example, who is constantly alerting us to the 'correct' view of matters (so Dido, in love with *Aeneas*, 'gave no thought to appearance or her good name and no longer kept her love a secret in her own heart, but called it marriage, using the word to cover her guilt'[32]). The modern novelist, too, can rarely resist the temptation to tell us how to interpret a character or scene.

Nevertheless, Homer is not quite as guileless as all that. Here *Hector* launches his final, fatal attack on Achilles, and Homer decorates the moment with a simile: 'He gathered himself and swooped like a high-flying eagle that drops to earth through black clouds to pounce on a tender lamb or cowering hare' (22.308).

Hector, then, is the eagle and Achilles the tender lamb. We are entitled to wonder how the poet can bring himself to develop such an apparently absurd comparison.

'Focalization' is the technical term for asking of any literary text, 'Through whose eyes is the reader supposed to understand these words'?[33] Clearly Achilles cannot be described as a 'tender lamb' in any objective terms. The simile makes best sense if we 'see' it through *Hector*'s eyes. *Hector* is preparing himself for the ultimate trial. It is as if he is trying to convince himself that he is an eagle, Achilles a lamb, as he charges. The simile is therefore 'focalized' through *Hector*'s eyes, at that moment in time, giving us a subtle narrator's insight into how he is thinking.

It is especially important to bear this technique in mind when we read the speeches. Homeric heroes say what is in their interest to say at the time. It may not be the objective truth. For example, when Achilles sees the Greeks in serious trouble after he has rejected the embassy begging him to return, he exclaims to Patroclus: 'now I think the Greeks will be gathering at my knees in supplication! They are in desperate straits' (11.609). One might object that in Book 9 the Greeks had already gathered at his knees in supplication, and Achilles had rejected them. But that is not the point. This is a mocking cry of triumph – the

situation will show the Greeks how much they need Achilles now.

Again, when Achilles rejects that embassy, he informs his audience that he has two life-options:

'My divine mother, silver-footed Thetis, says that destiny has left two courses open to me on my journey to the grave. If I stay here and fight it out round Ilium, there is no home-coming for me, but there will be eternal glory instead. If I go back to the land of my fathers, my heroic glory will be forfeit, but my life will be long and I shall be spared an early death.' (9.410–16)

This is news to us. Up till now, we have been told that Achilles was doomed to a short but glorious life.[34] But this revelation, designed for the moment, is perfectly judged to convince the embassy that it will not succeed. In both these cases Homer is refocalizing the action through the eyes of a specific hero in a specific situation.

The issue of focalization is an important one because it may cause us to rethink our views about the 'objectivity' of Homer's third-person narrative. Can we be quite certain, for example, that when Homer calls Odysseus 'resourceful' or describes war 'with all its tears', he is doing nothing but reporting the facts as he sees them? Might there not still be an element of the evaluative about these descriptions?

SPEECH, ACTION AND CHARACTER

One tends to associate heroic epic with action. But in the *Iliad* there are no fewer than 666 speeches, making up over 40 per cent of the whole work. The most remarkable fact of all is that, though Achilles is absent from more than half the *Iliad*, his voice is heard far more than anyone else's.[35] *Hector* and Agamemnon come next, appropriately enough (though a very long way behind) – they are the leaders of their armies and also the main foils for Achilles. ZEUS as king of the gods has the most to say on the divine side, as one would expect.

These bald statistics reveal the key players and balance of power that prevail on earth and Olympus. But number of speeches is not everything. Intensity of speech is also important. *Hector*'s wife *Andromache* makes only four speeches but they occur at highly emotional moments – when she thinks, and then when she knows, she will never see her husband again. *Briseis*, Achilles' girl taken by Agamemnon, has only one speech, which she delivers when she is handed back to Achilles and finds Patroclus dead. At fourteen lines long, it is an extraordinarily powerful lament.[36]

The speeches carry the psychological weight of the poem. Homer's actors reveal who they are, what makes them tick, primarily in what they say to each other and what they do, especially in how they react to each other. As we have said, there is a strong distinction between speeches, which evaluate and interpret and reveal character, and (third-person) narrative, which seems merely to report (see section above).

Consider, for example, the scene in which Patroclus is sent by Achilles to find out who has been wounded. Patroclus arrives in Nestor's hut, and with exquisite economy Homer uncovers the various relationships. Nestor and Machaon

> had quenched their parching thirst and were agreeably engaged in conversation, when Patroclus suddenly appeared in the doorway, a mortal like a god. The old man saw him, got up from his polished chair, took him by the hand, brought him in and told him to sit down. But Patroclus from the other side refused and explained:
>
> 'No time for sitting down, my venerable lord; you will not persuade me. That man who sent me to find out the wounded man you just brought in – he commands respect. He is easy to annoy. But, as I can see for myself that it is Machaon, shepherd of the people, I will go back at once and report to Achilles. You know well enough, Olympian-bred sir, what a difficult man he is, quite capable of finding fault without reason.'
>
> Nestor the Gerenian charioteer replied:
>
> 'Why is Achilles so concerned about a few Greek casualties, when he knows nothing about the disaster affecting the whole army? (11.642–59)

The moment Patroclus appears, Nestor sees that this is a golden opportunity to get a message across to Achilles through his close companion. No wonder he immediately tries to make Patroclus feel so welcome and at home. Patroclus' reply is just as telling. 'That man', he says, will not like it. He is 'difficult'.

In a few brief, exquisitely suggestive strokes, we know all we need to about the sort of person Achilles is, the hold Achilles has over Patroclus, Patroclus' feelings about Achilles and his (fully justified) unease at getting ensnared by Nestor. But Nestor will not let go. A few Greek casualties? The situation is far worse – and off he goes on a massive 148-line speech to persuade Patroclus that if Achilles will not return to fight, well, perhaps Patroclus should. It is a doom-laden turning-point.

That, incidentally, is why Nestor's speech is so long. This is a critical moment, and such moments are usually expanded by Homer to indicate their importance. For example, in the climactic fight between Achilles and *Hector* in Book 22, the two heroes exchange spear throws, then *Hector* charges and Achilles kills him. But the whole 'moment' takes 340 lines from the moment *Priam* sees Achilles racing across the plain, to *Hector*'s death – the oral poet's expansive art at its finest (22.25–366).

It is also typical of Homer to show character not through direct description but through the reactions of others. For example, when the heralds sent by Agamemnon to fetch *Briseis* arrive at Achilles' quarters:

> They came to a halt, too terrified and embarrassed before their lord to address him or ask anything. But [Achilles] realized what was going on and spoke out:
>
> 'Heralds, ambassadors of Zeus and men, welcome. Come in. My quarrel is not with you . . .' (1.331–5)

Homer's simple report of the heralds' fear and embarrassment is all that is needed to indicate both how unhappy the heralds are with the task they have been asked to carry out – their role is to deliver messages, yet they stand there tongue-tied and quaking – and the sort of reaction they expected from a man like Achilles who, after all, had only just been prevented from

killing Agamemnon. The sense of relief as Achilles absolves them and welcomes them in is almost palpable. This Achilles is capable of human sympathy after all.

Homer keeps himself in the background and lets his characters speak and act for themselves – a fine example of that Homeric 'objectivity', of which the poet is, of course, in total control (see p. xxix). Homer's refusal to interpret scenes for us, but to stand back and merely report what happened and who said what to whom, leaves us room to breathe, to make our own sense of what is going on. So if, for example, we were to ask what is the moral of the *Iliad*, or what Homer really wanted us to think about Achilles, or war, or life, we would struggle to produce a definitive answer.

The novelist, by contrast, goes out of his or her way to leave little to the imagination: the reader is rarely in doubt as to the author's view of the significance of every word and every action, however small or great. To that extent Homer anticipates the theatre. The dramatist cannot shape responses through the authorial third-person narrative: only actors, their words and actions are on display. Interpretation is all. As an oral poet, Homer speaks the parts anyway, like an actor; but although he would be able to impose interpretation through the third-person narrative if he so chose, he tends not to. We make of it what we will.

BATTLES

Of the 15,000 lines in the *Iliad*, battle takes up some 5,500, made up of three hundred encounters.[37] Death, unrealistically, nearly always comes quickly and cleanly after a single blow, though there are some odd or gruesome deaths from particularly nasty blows:

> Peneleos struck him under the eyebrow in the socket of the eye. The spear dislodged his eyeball, pierced the eye-socket and came out at the back of his head. He sank back, stretching out both his hands. But Peneleos, drawing his sharp sword, hit him full on the neck and brought

> head and helmet tumbling down to the ground. The heavy spear was still stuck in the eye as Peneleos raised it aloft, like a poppy-head . . . (14.493–9)

But the field is not littered with moaning, wounded and dying warriors.

Out of the three hundred encounters there are only twenty-eight duels, i.e. where warriors confront each other and agree to fight. Warriors very rarely launch out into an extended sequence of killings (Patroclus and Achilles are among the few exceptions[38]). Hit-and-run is by far the most favoured tactic. The warriors, in other words, tend to look after themselves as best they can. They are not desperate to die. Of the 230 warriors killed in these encounters, 170 are *Trojan*, 50 Greek.[39]

Even though there are many typical sequences and features to the battle-scenes (see p. xxviii), Homer varies them with great ingenuity: general fighting, individual combats, strings of deaths, battle on the ground or from chariots, exhortations, taunts, challenges, routs, counter-attacks, divine interventions, similes, and so on. In particular, he often gives us quite moving individual thumbnail portraits of the dead warriors, evoking personal worlds far from the battlefield:

> Then Menelaus son of Atreus caught the brilliant hunter Scamandrius with his sharp spear. Scamandrius was a great man for the chase, who had been taught by the goddess Artemis herself how to bring down any kind of wild game that lives in the mountain forests. But Artemis who delights in arrows was of no help to him now, nor were the long shots that had won him fame. As Scamandrius fled before him, the great spearman Menelaus son of Atreus stabbed him with his spear in the middle of the back between his shoulders and drove it on through his chest. He crashed down on his face, and his armour clattered about him. (5.49–59)

Note the primary information: *Scamandrius*, expert in the chase, is killed by Menelaus. Then comes the development: he was a hunter, taught by ARTEMIS but, ironically, she could not help him now. Finally, the detail of the death: he is stabbed through

the back as he fled. This method of describing the death of a warrior is very common.

The contrasting scenes of war and peace add powerfully to the pathos of the *Iliad*. The brief description that accompanies the fall of a warrior often points up the contrast. Here the Greek hero Diomedes cuts down *Xanthus* and *Thoön*:

> Then he went after Xanthus and Thoön, sons of Phaenops, both late-born. Phaenops was old now and ailing and had no other son to whom he could leave his wealth. Diomedes killed them both, depriving them of their precious lives and leaving their father only tears and a broken heart. He never welcomed them home alive from the war. Relatives divided up the estate. (5.152–8)

Homer's restraint is typical. The report is enough: he does not have to make efforts to elicit our sympathy with an intrusive emotionalizing comment.

Similes, too, introduce worlds a long way from the battlefield. The natural world, of lions, boars, hunters and farmers, features frequently. This is usually a dangerous world, of defence and attack. Here Idomeneus faces *Aeneas*:

> But Idomeneus was not to be scared off like a little boy. He waited for him like some mountain boar, confident in his strength, who faces a crowd of huntsmen advancing on him in a lonely spot: his back bristles, his eyes flame like fire and he sharpens his tusks, eager to take on men and dogs – so the great spearman Idomeneus awaited the onslaught of Aeneas and gave no ground at all. (13.470–78)

Homely similes are equally in evidence. Here the god *APOLLO* smashes through the Greek defences, like a boy on the beach:

> Then, with equal ease, the god knocked down the Greek wall, as a boy at the seaside knocks down a sandcastle: he builds it to amuse himself, as children do, and then with his hands and feet wrecks the whole thing for fun – so you, Apollo, wrecked the Greeks' arduous efforts and sowed panic among them. (15.361–6)

Here the poet remembers the pre-war days. As Achilles chases *Hector*, they pass 'the stone washing-places where the wives and lovely daughters of the *Trojans* used to wash their shining clothes in earlier days, when there was peace, before the coming of the Greeks' (22.154–6). This focus on different worlds away from bloodshed and death is one of the *Iliad*'s greatest glories, one source of its rich humanity.

SIMILES

There are over three hundred similes in the *Iliad*, occupying about 1,100 lines (7 per cent of the whole). They are miraculous creations, redirecting the listener's attention in the most unexpected ways and suffusing the poem with vividness, pathos and humour. There are four basic types:

1. Short similes with a single point of comparison, e.g. 'like nightfall' (1.47), 'like fawns' (22.1).
2. An extended short simile, in the form 'like X, which/that . . .', for example 'like fawns that dash across the plain and exhaust themselves and stop, because they have no more will to resist' (4.243–5).
3. The subject is mentioned, and the simile begins in the form 'as when, as, like', and ends 'such was/so X happened' (ring-composition: see p. xxviii). The similes likening Idomeneus to a boar, and *APOLLO* to a boy knocking down a sandcastle, are of this type.
4. The simile introduces the subject *before* the narrative has reached that point – thus 'as when Y happens, so X happened', for example: The spear 'hit Aretus' round shield. This failed to stop it, and the spear pierced it and drove on through his belt into his abdomen. *As* a strong man with a sharp axe strikes a farmyard ox behind the horns and then cuts its throat, and the ox springs forward and then collapses, *so* Aretus sprang forward and then fell on his back' (17.517–23). The point is that *Aretus* had not collapsed when the simile began – the simile describes an ox collapsing and *then* says that was how *Aretus* collapsed.

Similes tend to occur at moments of high emotion, drama and tension, often introducing a change of perspective (e.g. the entrance of a warrior), and they are especially prevalent in battle-scenes. The most common points of comparison with human life and action are lions (used forty times in all), birds, fire, cattle, wind and water, and boars. Thirty-one subjects occur once only: these include mule, ass, worm, rainbow, bean, dew, milk, lead, oil, ivory, trumpet, sandcastle and horse-trainer. As for their function, these similes introduce worlds of peace and plenty into a martial poem; they impose the unchanging world of nature on temporary, fleeting human existence, dignifying and adding significance to it; by using contemporary subject-matter within the experience of all listeners they give contemporary vividness to the world of the heroic past; and they often create deep pathos, for example the dying warrior likened to a poppy heavy with spring rain (8.302). In the similes, perhaps more than elsewhere, Homer speaks most directly to us. Here Achilles addresses Patroclus, who has just been witnessing the *Trojan* onslaught on the Greeks:

> 'Patroclus, why are you in tears, like a little girl running along beside her mother and begging to be carried, tugging at her skirt to make her stop, although she is in a hurry, and looking tearfully up at her till at last she picks her up? That, Patroclus, is how you look, with the soft tears rolling down your cheeks.' (16.7)

Achilles is likened most frequently to fire (fourteen times), a god and a lion, and nine times in a parent–child image, often involving Patroclus – a significant comparison.

THE AUTHENTICITY AND SURVIVAL OF HOMER'S TEXT

In his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795), the German scholar F. A. Wolf argued that our *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were the work of more than one man.[40] His reason was that Homer did not know

how to write, and that Homer's poems were far too long for oral recitation. He therefore concluded that Homer composed a series of short, connected oral poems *c.* 950 BC; that these were expanded by other poets till writing became available; they were then enlarged even more by ancient literary editors, who used writing; and the result is what we have today. The job of the scholar was therefore to decide what was Homeric, and what was not – the famous Homeric question. So began the long battles between the 'analysts', such as Wolf, and the 'unitarians', who believed there was one composer only of the *Iliad*.

Many competing analytical theories emerged.[41] Some argued that Homer composed only a few songs himself, others that he assembled short songs composed by others into a larger structure. Some thought the *Iliad* was originally a brief poem about Achilles' anger, later expanded either by the addition of episodes, or by enlarging existing episodes. Images of the *Iliad*'s construction abounded: of skins like an onion or layers like a cake, of adding pieces to a puzzle or a superstructure to a house, of dough into which new ingredients were blended, and so on.

But oral theory now holds sway. Most scholars believe that one poet was responsible for our *Iliad*; that its unique size and concentrated focus are indicative of a special poetic effort, generated by whatever cultural and poetic circumstances; that Homer comes at the end of a tradition of oral story-telling going back hundreds of years (so that he has, in a sense, inherited the work of hundreds of earlier oral poets); and that his art consists in the unique way he has reworked these traditional, typical materials devised to enable the oral poet to recite in the first place – from phrase and sentence at one level to 'theme' and story-pattern at larger levels – into the masterpieces we have today. But that leaves the questions – how do they survive to this day, and with what resemblance to any oral 'original' (if, indeed, oral poets had a concept of an 'original')?

All ancient Greek literature was given a definitive form by Greek scholars working in Egypt from the third century BC onwards to produce the best text they could.[42] Their texts form the basis of ours, but it is impossible to tell how far our text

represents any single oral performance: the evidence, by definition, cannot exist. These ancient Greek scholars, like earlier ones, felt unhappy about much that they found in Homer, especially the repetitions (they did not understand how oral poetry worked – see p. xxviii) and failures of style and logic (oral poetry is different from written in this respect). They therefore raised many questions about what was Homeric and what not, and the idea of 'many Homers' is very old. There is no doubt that there was interference with the text of Homer down to the third century BC (at least): the question is, how much?

There is general scholarly agreement that Book 10 is not by Homer. It is wholly self-contained, it is never referred to again, and if it was not there, no one would notice its absence. The slaughter of sleeping men by night is hardly heroic. There are many oddities of language, and the speeches are not constructed as they are in the rest of the epic. Beyond that, there is general agreement that in conception the *Iliad* is the work of a single mind, though there continues to be disagreement about detail.[43] Inconsistencies are generally explained nowadays as the result of Homer's gradual expansion and development of the story over a long period of time, or of his incorporation into the text of material that did not quite fit, rather than because of interference with the text by others.

That raises another important question: if Homer's epics were the product of an oral performance *c.* 700 BC, how do they survive to this day? At some stage they must have been written down, but we do not know how or when. Some scholars believed Homer used writing, in which case there is no problem. Written versions certainly existed by the sixth century BC because we hear of efforts to produce a standard text of Homer for bards to recite at competitions. From then on, such was Homer's influence that his texts were copied and recopied for education and pleasure throughout the Graeco-Roman periods.

When the Roman empire in the West collapsed in the fifth century AD, what knowledge of Greek literature there was in the West disappeared with it.[44] Even the Bible was read for the next almost thousand years in Jerome's Latin translation (begun

AD 380). But Greek continued to be read and copied in the Roman empire in the East centred round Constantinople (modern Istanbul), an empire inhabited almost entirely by Greek speakers.

However, when Ottoman Turks began to threaten that city from the twelfth century AD onwards, its scholars fled west with their precious manuscripts. This is how Greek literature survives today. Western Europe knew about Homer at this time, of course, because Roman authors mentioned him constantly (Virgil's *Aeneid* was a sort of Roman *Iliad–Odyssey*). So it was a thrilling time for Western scholars in Italy when Greeks began arriving with these great works that they had only heard of but never read. A convenient date to mark Homer's arrival back in the West is 1354, when Petrarch acquired a manuscript of the two epics from Nicolaos Sigeros, a Greek involved in the unification of the Western and Eastern churches. Naturally he could not read them and in a letter he writes: 'Homer is mute to me, or rather I am deaf to him. Still, I enjoy just looking at him and often, embracing him and, sighing, I say, "O great man, how eagerly would I listen to you."'[45]

No one need suffer that fate today.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a; on the beach the Greeks are said to be living in *klisiai*, literally 'lean-tos', presumably wooden shacks, shelters or huts built next to their ships. Achilles' is surprisingly grand (24.449–56); THETIS' marriage: 24.60–62; Achilles as baby: 9.485–91; his education: 11.831; Patroclus: 23.85–90; *Paris*' looks: 3.39, 54–5, 64–6; *Paris* and *APHRODITE*: 24.27–30; Helen's beauty: 3.156–8; *Paris* abused hospitality: 13.620–27; *Paris*' seduction of Helen: 3.442–6; *Hector*'s attitude: 3.39–66; recruiting mission: 7.127, cf. 11.769 ff.; catalogue of ships: 2.494–779; omens: 2.299–332. It is worth observing that Homer makes no reference to Agamemnon's need to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to raise a favourable wind for Troy, a major theme of ancient Greek tragic poets (e.g. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*). Note how the past is nearly always 'focalized' (see p. xxx) through the mouths of the characters, not 'objectively' reported by Homer.