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READING HOMER'S *THE ILIAD* AND *THE ODYSSEY* FOR A CONTEMPORARY WORLD
VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* present many problems for the reader for introspection, and thereby suggesting probable solutions embedded in the narratives of both the poems. There lie fundamental questions, as to why read Homer at all, and more intricate questions about the reception of the poem in Europe in the nineteenth century that suggest the need for a closer and more rigorous analysis of the viability of the Homeric studies. Underlying the attempt to deal with such issues the author has taken into account the formation of canon on Homer in the last century that deals more with the content than the form, which deals more with the contemporaneity of poems that were written more two and half centuries back. The problematic deals with and rather comes to the conclusion that it is human emotion and the perennial issue of the struggle of life with its various hurdles, that inhabit all such literatures that have become immortal through ages and through peoples. This reception of emotional charge in the two poems warrants the sublimity so attributed to the poems.

Keywords: Classical, Homer, Greek, Strife, Achilles, Odysseus

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Introduction

H D F Kitto the classical scholar begins his classic study of the Greeks with the following insertion:

"In a part of the world that had for centuries been civilized and quite highly civilized there gradually emerged a people not very numerous not very powerful, not very well organized who had a totally new conception of what human life was for. And showed for the first time what the human mind was for." (Kitto 7)

It has been said the chief interest of *The Iliad* is that we can find in it answers to fundamentally important questions, characteristics of European or Western culture, a sense of the tragic, domestic comedy, skepticism of the role the divine in human life, admiration for the strength of the individual human will, pleasure in the kind of heroic conflict that elicits a moral pride and a fascination with the interaction between moral choice and political life in the community.

The Homeric poems are the repository for us of the concepts like these which remain significant or even fundamental to the western culture today. in the narrower sense of culture as the inherited intellectual

and chiefly literary tradition the Homeric poems have an even more primary place for us they are the original literary documents and that which has had the widest influence until very recently of course educated individuals have shared a culture based on the classics which pervaded all aspects of intellectual lives. So long did this hold true that to understand and to appreciate it a great percentage of western writing without familiarity with the classical tradition is virtually impossible. In a sense one has to buy into the culture, one must know the classics to understand those who knew them. But this reason for reading Homer seems a little too mercantile for me, not that it isn't valid but it isn't enough. If this is why we are interested in Homer, let's put the question a step further.

If one hasn't read *The Iliad* before one needs to know how we got here. Homer's audience did and the poem assumes that now it is on the part of its listeners or readers. *The Iliad* tells the tale of one incident in the Trojan War. The action covers only few days and yet includes within its scope a complete account of the ten year struggle between the Greek forces and the ancient city of Troy. What happens over the course of these few days provides the subject matter of the poem. But it is also important to understand what came before.

Now as much as if I find myself drawn to sort of magnificence of this formulation on the Greeks I submit that it is very difficult to see way in which *The Iliad* whose hero is as we know is bound up always with the imminence of his own death and the deaths he brings on others of course and *The Odyssey* whose hero, as we learn of the epics opening lines devotes much of his attention to saving his own skin. It's difficult to see how these two poems can be said to share common views what Kitto says is human life was for. Likewise we may see in Achilles entirely nonintellectual single mindedness and Odysseus over intellectualized craftiness if we may find a difficulty between those any clear agreements on what the human mind is for. We may be able to rise eventually with Kitto to some level of abstraction at which we can perceive the two Homeric poems as somehow interlocking parts of a single Greek consensus but what is most evident on the surface of the poems at least, may not be there congruity but their disparity.

The Homeric Question

Basically the Homeric question entails three problems, namely, who is the author of the Homeric poems by which we mean *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, in antiquity we know that there were other poems by Homer but they don't exist anymore. Is the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* the same, the question to which we will come back, and when were these poems composed and how were they composed, in an age of which evidence for literacy is very slight.

Now in this we are concerned when and how, the second question the relationship between *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* poet, we won't dwell. As to the first question as to who is the author of the Homeric poems is, I will come a little later. As to the date of the epics I wish I could give you a visual timeline, but let's do it verbally. It is tenable now that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were composed somewhere around 750 BC. They are telling the story however of a society which seems to have flourished something like 1600 to around 1200 BC. So Homer is singing about a society considerably prior to his own. The traditional date for the fall of Troy is 1184 BC. Before I consider the composition of the poems let me say few words about this time scheme and about our evidence for literacy, its loss and its eventual reintroduction in Greece.

Most ancient Greeks seem to have believed that Homer's narrative was historically true, that there had been a momentous conflict between powerful cities and the city on the coast of Asia Minor called Troy or Ilios. And most ancient listeners seemed to believe or accept that this Trojan War had in fact been the cause of the fall of the city. For almost 2000 years however this belief was lost. Beginning already in antiquity with the Alexandrian scholars around the 2nd century BC and continuing until late in the 19th century. AD, the Homeric poems were considered increasingly pure fiction. That is the history of Trojan War was felt to be the same kind of fantasy as tales of monsters and magic as Odysseus tells in *Odyssey*. Practically no one believed that the world of Homer had any basis.

. One of this civilization's last exploit was sending an expedition around 1200 BC against Troy. That expedition was successful and the remains of Troy show devastation by great fire at approximately this time. The Mycenaean empire was however beginning to weaken, waves of more barbarous invaders destroyed the

Mycenaean citadels. But it is this Mycenaean heroic age which the Homeric poems seem to represent with a considerable degree of historical accuracy. Within the last century as I said archeologists had begun to excavate these cities. Among their other findings or clay tablets written in a script known as Linear B. Briefly the code of this language was cracked in the 1950s not by professional classicists but by a young English architect Michael Ventris. Ventris had studied the classics in schools and had later in the army was trained as cryptographer, so he was fascinated by the Linear B tablets which were discovered for long but not deciphered. For over ten years he tinkered with the problem. In June 1952, he announced his discovery that the code was a form of Greek. In 1953 new tablets discovered in Pylos confirmed the hypotheses. And now these evidences are universally accepted.

These written tablets provide our evidence for literacy in the Mycenaean period that is the earlier period about which Homer sings.

Two facts however are important. All these tablets discovered, none of them contained anything remotely resembling a literary text like the Homeric poems. They were found in the remains of great palaces and fundamentally they are the documents of bureaucracies, such as tax levies, levies of the armies, items like that. Second although they can be deciphered as Greek, they are not written in what we know as the Greek alphabet, instead in a syllabary language, with signs of combinations of vowels and consonants, quite different from Greek. This latter is evidence for the loss of literacy for as far as we know this Mycenaean syllabic scripts disappeared. There are no traces of it in the subsequent sub Mycenaean and Protogeometric period. An argument for silence can never be conclusive. We might find tablets tomorrow that use the language in the intervening period but what favors this belief that literacy was lost is that if Greeks already possessed a system of writing it's hard to understand and it seems unlikely that they would have abandoned to adopt the Phoenician alphabet later modified into Greek alphabet as we know it. But in the adaptation of the Phoenician letters which we know today as the Greek alphabet. This then seems to represent a rare introduction of some form of literacy after a dark age in which the knowledge of writing which probably was previously only been known to few any way, was lost.

Homer is Homer's poem's composer around 750 BC not before 730 inscription which is our earliest inscription in Greek. Homer's poem is telling us about a culture which flourished somewhere in the 16th or 1740 BC and possessed some form of writing, but a different one which we now know as Greek. The question we are faced with then is how a poet could construct *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, a total of approximately 27000 lines without the aid of writing. The kinds of evidence that we can examine in considering this problem whether the two poems can be attributed to the same poet, might be grouped in three main categories

- a. The language of the poems
- b. The structure or narrative composition
- c. The world view

The scope of the paper only allows us to discuss the 'world view.'

***The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*: The World View and Modern Life**

The immediate cause of *The Iliad* is shown immediately. In book one of the poem Agamemnon the leader of the Greek forces has refused to give up a girl Chryseis who was his war prize, we won't enter too much, the women being the objects of exchange.¹ One who took the city for gold also took its women, and Chryseis is one of those. Agamemnon refused to give her up although her father, Chryses, pleads for her return in lieu of valued ransoms for her. He is a priest and when he is spurned by Agamemnon, he prays to his god Apollo to take vengeance upon the Greeks. Apollo hears and answers his prayer by sending a devastating plague upon the Greek army.

The major action of *The Iliad* book one is a public quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles that takes place in an assembly called to debate a course of action which might offer relief from the plague. This is the immediate motivation of the events that follow the 23 books of *The Iliad*. But this tale itself is embedded in a context, of course a larger context of the Trojan War.

This war in turn has both an immediate and a more remote motivation. In this case I will begin with the more remote. The earliest cause of the Trojan War lies a generation earlier at the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. Peleus is a mortal hero, Thetis an immortal goddess. They are the parents of Achilles the hero. Later poets tell us that their wedding marks the last time that mortals and gods associated together, but after the occasion of the wedding feast, one goddess was not invited. And that was Eris. Eris is the name for strife, combat, contention. There is obvious association between Eris on the one hand and Eros on the other. And we find often throughout our culture an association between love and war. We may even find it in our own life. At any rate this goddess called strife or discord is in spite of not having been invited arrives at the wedding. She gets there and to roll into the hall a golden apple and we remain in a fairy tale, a golden inscribed "for the fairest." Among the goddesses, all hell breaks loose at this point. The three final contenders for this prize the golden apple are Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. To decide the title and who is entitled to possess the object, they call in a good looking country boy, a Trojan prince named Paris. This is what is later known as the judgment of Paris. Each goddess being entirely content with her own charm throws a little prize for Paris. Hera offers political power, Athena offers victory in war, so if he would choose her, he would be triumphant warrior throughout his career. Aphrodite offers sex, the most beautiful woman in the world, no contests. But a minor problem, because the most beautiful woman in the world is already married, and all Greeks had courted Helen and ultimately her suitors had made a pact among themselves, kind of mutual assistance pledging themselves as allies to whomever she should ultimately choose as her husband. She chose Menelaus for reasons unknown. Who can tell how that heart decides these things. She chose and she is living with him in Sparta, also called Mycenae. When Paris leaves he does not leave alone. He leaves with Helen.

One must remember that Paris came as a guest to Menelaus' house and left with his wife. You can't do that. So the Trojan War is the expedition of the forces rallied by Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon to avenge that wrong. I want to say one further word about this. Posner says in *The Economics of Justice*:

The only well-defined and generally accepted governmental function in the world depicted in the Homeric poems is defense for (example, of Troy) against foreign invaders. even as to suggested that this, as we shall see, there is some question. Violations Murder, stealing, and other violations of internal public order are not public offenses. No public machinery of adjudication, enforcement, or punishment is maintained for the security of retaliation the person or victim's family, property. The sanction for murder is retaliation by the victim's family operating outside of any public framework of rights or remedies. In the shield scene in Iliad and elsewhere that the victim's family might accept a price in lieu of killing might murderer and that the price might be determined by some form of private arbitration the but at no stage in the process is the state involved. (123-24)

I think as modern readers it is a little difficult for us to understand what that translates into. Menelaus has a problem with his wife why should thousands of men set out to die over that. And I think in that sense it is very important to understand the centrality of Paris's act and that's why I say you just can't do that. In a Greek world in a very differently organized society I think we can see that performing this kind of act is to breakdown the fundamental social relationships. You have to be both reliant on the fundamental basics of friendship, you accept someone into your home, they are not going to take your wife or take your life, and if you cannot rely on that basic sort of basic contract, then the society disintegrates. This is in one way that Helen is a marker of larger set of necessary set of relationship if society is going to cohere and be able to function.

I think that's what in some sense what really lies behind the expedition to rescue Helen. I suggest a normal sort of allegorical sense. Helen is "the synecdoche of the entire trajectory of the legend of Troy." (Suzuki 227) As one scholar has put it, after the ships are launched and Greeks sail off to Troy, meanwhile Helen stands hopelessly watching the men who are going to do battle for her. She is there still since nations that brave each other for markets, for raw materials for rich lands and treasures are fighting first and forever for Helen.²

It should not surprise us that there is a wonderful kind of echo effect of the more remote cause of war that is Paris's rape of Helen in the Latin etymological sense of seizing someone and the more immediate crisis

of *The Iliad* that is Agamemnon's seizure of the girl Chryseis. On the one hand Agamemnon and all the Greeks who came with him are fighting to regain Helen. On the other hand we see that Achilles and his men in fact are refusing to fight because he has lost Chryseis. The other way we differ from Homer's original audience is that we read the poem in the written form. This is not as far as we can tell, from archaeological, historical and internal evidence, the way that the poems were first received. To say that an original audience heard rather than read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is perhaps less startling than to take the next inevitable step. The corollary is that Homer of course did not write them down. I think it is hard for us to conceive that he used whatever writing material was available. It's hard for us to conceive that not being the case but perhaps the simplest way to mention it is to say that these are 27 thousand lines or more of them, of this singer who essentially made it up a way long. This conception that somehow Homer whoever he was or whoever she was made it up which takes us to the heart of what is traditionally called the Homeric question.

Why Read Homer at all?

The question remains as to why read Homer at all? A tryst with the political life in the community, Homeric poems are of great consequence to not only the western culture but perhaps for most of the colonized world. Some would say it is almost insane to appreciate the western culture without reading the classics. Perhaps it is a little too mercenary to dwell on the reconnaissance before you intrude into a culture. Surely enough if one reads Homer to understand the western culture there arise questions as to why did James Joyce read him, or Tennyson and even Virgil read him.

Maybe we want to read *The Odyssey* to understand James Joyce's Ulysses but why did Dante or Virgil read *The Odyssey*. By now Homer is a required reading, but how did it get that way. Here I would suggest that there are two ways to approach the classics. One is to have read the classics in the end and in the other is to continually ask yourself what is a classic, what is it meant to others what might it mean to me. To do this is to look for what I call the personal rather than merely social answers to the earlier question.

I would like to suggest that both of these answers, the personal and the cultural, are meaningful and rather satisfying. But I would also suggest a warning for both types of answers may present, what one can call, a sort of cultural narcissism. By this I mean examining another culture only in order to see ourselves reflected there. This is a malady in my mind closely related to the illusion of progress. I have in the mind the perverse idea that all previous peoples were marvelously and chiefly significant as rather curious links in an evolutionary chains in leading infallibly to that triumph of genetic, intellectual and social development, us.

In the Greek classics the lure of this narcissistic mirror is particularly seductive or in the most fundamental ways the human condition does remain the same. And Greek literature in epic in tragedy as well as another expression tended to go directly to the heart of the matter to confront those fundamental human issues, in ways we can immediately recognize. I suggested earlier that each of us finds in *Iliad* a meaning for him or herself .perhaps this is the time to admit to my own prejudices to sketch my own answer to the questions I posed to you in the beginning.

In my reading the *Iliad* places always one truth before our minds. And that truth is death. The fact that human beings suffered, the fact that they inflicted on one another the fact that to the gods it is irrelevant. To me the *Iliad* seems perhaps most honest, uncompromising, unflinching confrontation with this truth in literature. The poem offers no real hope and no ultimate despair, it celebrates the beauty, strength and meaninglessness of man. To me this paradox presents the most immediate and irrevocable question of human life and it does not change. This constancy this unflinching attention to what seems unchanged and indeed unchangeable in man's lot offers one reason why the Homeric poems nourish us. And I freely admit an attraction to that kind of identification. The silent song that Homer knew is finally the song of ourselves. The temptation is strong to read the Homeric poems only in order to recognize ourselves there. For to seek or to see in the poems only these similarities may betray a kind of intellectual immaturity. A fuller appreciation of the poems, I think to man is that we tend to be alien as well as to be familiar in the Homeric works.

If we respond to the thing as it is and try to understand not only the ways in which Homer's world is remarkably similar to us but also how it differs from ours. Specifically as one begins to read *Iliad* there are two

ways in which we as modern readers differ from Homer's original audience, one of these is that we are indeed reading the lines and not hearing them and the other is that we may not already be familiar with the story.

In one way or another since antiquity critics have pointed out the differences between the two Homeric poems. The distinction between the *Iliad* as tragedy and *The Odyssey* as comedy that I have already alluded to here has been the most common one. But in addition the *Iliad* has been called passionate *The Odyssey* ethical. The *Iliad* has been called the poem of being, *The Odyssey* as the poem of becoming. The *Iliad* has been characterized by an all pervasive heroic consciousness. Passion comes from the Greek word *pathos*. Of course we know this from the Christian context where *pathos* means suffering. To call *The Iliad* passionate means it's about suffering in a sense, accompanying suffering. Ethical comes from the Greek word 'ethos' which means not something about morality but *ethos* means one's way of life the kind of characteristic life of *The Iliad*. *The Iliad* has been called the poem of being, *The Odyssey* as a poem of becoming. Or *The Iliad* had been characterized as a poem pervaded by the heroic death consciousness whereas the *Odyssey* celebrates life and all its variety and directness. There are very many ways to view it and it seems impossible to ignore. There exists a profound and pervasive difference between the two poems which we call the Homeric Corpus. I will consider first the implications that this difference had been thought to have for the authorship of *The Odyssey* and then we will examine some sections of the poem to see how it differs substantially from the *Iliad* and how it might be understood on its own terms. Now in a little earlier in discussing the so called Homeric question I mentioned that one facet of the question concerns whether *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are the works of the same person whether composed approximately at the same time. I will leave you to formulate your own answers to these questions but I will examine the grounds on which traditionally answers have been sought.

We might argue either for development within one poet and in fact already in antiquity Longinus and others felt that the *Odyssey* was the work of Homer's old age. Or we might simply posit a variety of styles available to a poet depending upon his subject matter. This hypothesis is I think a little more difficult on account of nature of world poetry. But it seems to me not impossible. To sum up to this point on the grounds of language and composition there has never been a single unavoidable argument put forward to say that the poems must be the work of separate poets. Various arguments have been brought but none of them have been found to be wholly compelling.

Now the third way in which *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* might be compared is admittedly less easily defined than the poem's composition or the use of language. Broadly speaking I will call it the 'world view' as presented in the two works.

The ways in which these differ are myriad if not infinite but let me begin with a few basics. The world of *The Iliad* is one of war, that of *The Odyssey* one of peace. *The Iliad* tells us of men and gods but *The Odyssey* also includes ogres, witches and magicians as well as women who may be all of these. *The Iliad* is rather fixed in time and locale, *The Odyssey* ranges over the sea and over the years. *The Iliad* seems to affirm honour as we talked about earlier as the greatest good, while *The Odyssey* is more directly interested in retaining one's life and one's possession. *The Iliad* values personal integrity above all *The Odyssey* really admires deception. *The Iliad* focuses only on kings *The Odyssey* often on commoners. *The Iliad* returns always to death, *The Odyssey* always to marriage. *The Iliad* is a poem of loss *The Odyssey* is one of gain. This kind of list could go on and on. And each one of the points deserves its own consideration. At this point I simply want to discuss one of the most intriguing responses which has been formulated to account for the differences in these two works, with a rather systematic if surprising hypothesis. In 1897 the Victorian novelist Samuel Butler published a rather astounding study entitled *The Authoress of the Odyssey*. Butler's thesis that the *Odyssey* has been written by a woman or must have been written by a woman has been more recently taken up by Robert Graves in his fictionalized account *Homer's Daughter* published in 1955.

Now I don't know if one's reading of *The Odyssey* will draw them inevitably to this conclusion, but I would like to take a moment to discuss the kinds of arguments which drew Samuel Butler and subsequently Robert Graves to it. I will remind you here again of that notion that I earlier called cultural narcissism that is the attitude towards the classic which discovers only ourselves reflected there. This kind of attitude seems to

me potentially a rather reductive mirror which risks the variety and multi-faceted brilliance of the classics by cutting them down to a size, our own sizes. But if we step through the looking glass there may be on the other side something of a magnifying mirror and that is why one more fascinating aspect of classical studies can sometimes be a history of classical scholarship. That is how others have studied and read the classics because in its attitude to the classics a society will often reveal almost unconsciously as it were its own fundamental conceptions of itself and its own preconceptions.

Thus if we look at Butler's argument for attributing *The Odyssey* to woman author we find that the poem is much concerned with such mundane and implicit unheroic matters as to giving a bath, the taking of food, the weaving of cloth, the fringing of grain. Interestingly butler pints out that the poem's rather sordid concern with material gain and possession. This surely he asserts is a mark of the feminine mind. More tellingly the poem betrays predilection for deception and exhibits frequently lapses in logical thinking as well as a decided ignorance on nautical subjects. I assume the kind of picture getting here.

Conclusion

Unlike *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* attempts to tell many stories at once and the ways in which these various narratives seem sometimes imperfectly integrated with one another. We might detect two main kinds of inconsistency; one type arises simply from the plot line of the story after all we have at least three separate plots to be narrated. The travels of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus who goes off in search of his father, the adventures of Odysseus meantime, and previous to that departure of Telemachus and then ultimately in the final books of the combined adventures of Telemachus and Odysseus against the suitors.

There are scholars who feel that the interweaving the three major narratives simply prove to be too formidable a task for the poet of the odyssey and led her if not into the valley of the incoherence at least into the hinterland of inconsistency. Well such difficulties whether alleged or real, are not my subject matter. We may keep those in mind as we read the poem. A second kind of inconsistency besides just the fundamental complexity of the plot and I think I guess I should at least brace the alternative argument that too, it seems, that the very complexity of the plot may represent its newness. I mean the ability to do something like this to combine all of these strands at one time is quite a progression from the sort of straight forward narrative of *The Iliad*.

Both the poems differ from this kind of narrative logic and strains the conventions and language and logic to the breaking pint precisely in order to render as far as possible, an account of life to the limits. That's certainly what you have in *The Odyssey*. I might argue, in *The Iliad* the epic hero could be seem to be approaching the limits of power or principles or suffering perhaps even a kind of megalomania or self-affirmation. In the *Odyssey* it seems to me that the hero Odysseus approaches the limits of reality, the limits of the known and the knowable, both within himself and in the world around him.

The Iliad speaks movingly of coming to terms with reality and one's own place in it or perhaps once potential transcendence of it. But *The Odyssey* sings of the possible loss of reality, the loss of one's own identity. Here we might return to Kitto's formulation with which I began that the Greeks showed for the first time what the human mind was for. As W. B. Stanford showed in his study of the Ulysses theme of cross literature, if we assume as he does, that in eagerness to learn about God, man and nature, is the most characteristic feature of the whole Greek tradition then Odysseus is alone among Homer's heroes in displaying this intellectual curiosity as is going back to Kitto's formulation what *The Odyssey* tells us what the human mind is for. It is continually seeking to know more to fulfill a sort of insatiable curiosity about itself and about the world.

This particular aspect of the Odysseus is a constant seeker after knowledge in some ways, is much more fully developed. Most famously the explicit notion that Odysseus is a seeker after knowledge per se and not just a wanderer. But the most explicit original formation that Odysseus' wandering is explicitly after knowledge is by Dante. In the *Inferno* and he creates this figure of someone who is ceaselessly moving on to the next journey in order to seek to know more about the human beings and the world he may meet there.

That formulation of Dante's has of course been famously taken in our own culture in a poem, Tennyson's Ulysses, and I want to conclude with the conclusion of his version of *The Odyssey*.

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Notes

1. See Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985. Print.
2. On Helen's ambiguity in *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, see Suzuki (1989) 18-19, 34-38, 66-73.

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