The Greeks believed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed by a single poet whom they named Homer. Nothing is known of his life. While seven Greek cities claim the honor of being his birthplace, ancient tradition places him in Ionia, located in the eastern Aegean. His birthdate is undocumented as well, though most modern scholars now place the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.

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INTRODUCTION
INTRODUCTION

THE ILLIAD

"Iliad" is a word that means "a poem about Ilium" (i.e., Troy). and Homer's great epic poem has been known as "The Iliad" ever since the Greek historian Herodotus so referred to it in the fifth century B.C. But the title is not an adequate description of the contents of the poem, which are best summed up in its opening line: "the rage of Peleus' son Achilles." The incident that provoked Achilles' rage took place in the tenth and final year of the Achaeans' attack on Troy, and though Homer does work into his narrative scenes that recall earlier stages of the war (the muster of the Achaeans forces in Book 2, for example, and Priam's first sight of Agamemnon and the other Achaeans' chieftains in Book 3), the rage of Achilles—its cause, its course and its disastrous consequences—is the theme of the poem, the mainspring of the plot.

Chryses, a priest of Apollo, whose daughter has been carried off by the Achaeans in one of their raids, comes to the camp to ransom her. But she has been assigned, in the division of the booty, to the king who commands the Achaeans army, Agamemnon, and he refuses to give her up. Her father prays for help to Apollo, who sends a plague that devastates the Achaeans' camp. Achilles, leader of the Myrmidons, one of the largest contingents of the Achaeans army, summons the chieftains to an assembly. There they are told by the prophet Calchas that the girl must be returned to her father. Agamemnon has to give her up, but demands compensation for his loss. Achilles objects: let Agamemnon wait until more booty is taken. A violent quarrel breaks out between the two men, and Agamemnon finally announces that he will take recompense for his loss from Achilles, in the form of the girl Briseis, Achilles' share of the booty. Achilles represses an urge to kill Agamemnon and withdraws from the assembly, threatening to leave for home, with all his troops, the next day. The priest's daughter is restored to him, Apollo puts an end to the plague, and Briseis is taken away from Achilles' tent by Agamemnon's heralds.

Achilles turns to his goddess mother Thetis, asking her to prevail on Zeus, father of gods and men, to inflict loss and defeat on the Achaeans, so that they will realize how much they need him. Zeus is won over by
Thetis (to whom he is indebted for help on a previous occasion), and in spite of the vehement objections of his wife Hera (who, like his daughter Athena, hates the Trojans and works for their destruction), he turns the tide of battle against the Achaeans. The Trojan leader Hector, son of Troy’s old King Priam, drives the Achaeans back on their beached ships, round which they are forced to build a wall and ditch. At the urging of his chieftains, Agamemnon sends ambassadors to Achilles, offering him rich prizes and the hand of his daughter in marriage if he will return to the fighting line. The offer is refused, but the pleas of one of the ambassadors, Phoenix, an older man who belongs to Achilles’ household, do have some effect: Achilles withdraws his threat to leave the next day; he will stay until Hector and the Trojans reach his own ships.

The battle resumes and now the Trojan onslaught breaches the wall and threatens the ships. The Achaean chieftains—Agamemnon, his brother Menelaus, Diomedes and Odysseus—are wounded one by one. Achilles’ closest friend, Patroclus, sent by Achilles to find out how things stand in the Achaean camp, brings back the news and also pleads with Achilles to relent. He does so only partly; he agrees to let Patroclus go into battle with Achilles’ troops, wearing Achilles’ armor. This is enough: the Trojans in their turn are thrown back. But Patroclus is killed by the god Apollo, Troy’s protector, and by Hector, who strips off Achilles’ armor and puts it on himself.

Achilles’ rage is now directed against Hector, the killer of his dearest friend. He is reconciled with Agamemnon, and as soon as his mother brings him a splendid suit of armor, made by the smith-god Hephaestus, he returns to the battle, and after slaughtering many Trojans, meets and kills Hector. He lashes Hector’s corpse to his chariot and drags it to his own tent; he intends to throw it to the dogs and birds of prey. For Patroclus he holds a magnificent funeral, complete with athletic contests and human sacrifice. Whenever renewed grief for the loss of his friend overcomes him, he drags Hector’s body around Patroclus’ grave. But the body has been preserved from corruption by divine intervention, and the gods now decide (not unanimously, for Hera and Athena object) to send a message to Achilles through his mother: he is to release Hector’s body for ransom paid by King Priam of Troy. Achilles agrees, but what he does not anticipate is the arrival in his tent of Priam himself, alone, in the middle of the night. Instead of sending a herald, he has brought the ransom himself and begs for the body of his son. Achilles is reminded of his own father, also an old man who will never see his son again: Achilles knows, for his mother has told him, that his death is to come
soon after Hector's. He sends Priam safely back with Hector's body to Troy and so, runs the last line of the poem, "the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses" (24.944 in the translation). We know already that the death of Troy's main defender seals the fate of the city and that, as Thetis told Achilles: "hard on the heels of Hector's death your death / must come at once" (18.112–13).

This summary is the bare bones of an epic poem that consists in the original Greek of 15,693 lines of hexameter verse, composed—probably in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.—by a poet known to later ages as Homer, for whose life and activity no trustworthy information has come down to us. The poem, in other words, is some 2,700 years old. How, the reader may well ask, did it survive through such an expanse of time? By whom, for whom, and how and in what circumstances was it composed? Perhaps the best way to proceed to an exploration of these questions (no one can promise a complete and certain answer) is backward—from the text of this book.

It is a translation, by Robert Pagles, of the Greek text edited by David Monro and Thomas Allen, first published in 1902 by the Oxford University Press. This two-volume edition is printed in a Greek type, complete with lower- and uppercase letters, breathings and accents, which is based on the elegant handwriting of Richard Porson, an early-nineteenth-century scholar of great brilliance, who was also an incurable alcoholic as well as a great wit. This was of course not the first font of Greek type; in fact, the first printed edition of Homer, issued in Florence in 1488, was composed in type that imitated contemporary Greek handwriting, with all its complicated ligatures and abbreviations. Early printers tried to make their books look like handwritten manuscripts because in scholarly circles printed books were regarded as vulgar and inferior products—cheap paperbacks, so to speak.

Back to 1488, then, there is a continuous history of the printed text of Homer, differing a little from one editor to another but essentially fixed. Before that Homer existed only as a handwritten book. Such handwritten copies had been in circulation in Italy for a hundred years or so before the first printed edition. Petrarch had tried to learn Greek but gave up; Boccaccio succeeded and also in 1360 had a chair of Greek founded in Florence. But before Petrarch, Dante, though he put Homer in his limbo of non-Christian poets, had never read him, and could not have read him even if he had seen a text. For the best part of a thousand years, since the end of the Roman Empire, the knowledge of Greek had been lost in Western Europe. In the fourteenth century it was reintro-
duced into Italy from Byzantium, where a Greek-speaking Christian empire had maintained itself ever since Constantine made the city the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The knowledge of Greek and the manuscripts of the Greek classics, Homer included, came to Italy just in time; in May 1453 Byzantium fell to the Ottoman Turks, and the Greek empire of the East came to the end of its thousand-year career. During its long life it had carefully preserved, copied and recopied a select number of the Greek masterpieces of pre-Christian times. Homer prominent among them. The immediate predecessors of the printed edition of Florence were bound manuscript books written on vellum or on paper in a cursive minuscule script complete with accents and breathings. These books were the final phase of the process of copying by hand that went all the way back to the ancient world. In the ninth century the new minuscule handwriting had been adopted; since it separated words, it was easier to read than its predecessor, a hand consisting of freestanding capital letters without word division—the standard writing of the ancient world. In the second to fifth centuries A.D., the form and material of the books had changed: parchment with its longer life had replaced papyrus, and the codex form, our book form—folded quires of paper sewn at the back—had replaced the roll. In the ancient world the Iliad consisted of a number of papyrus rolls, the text written in columns on the inside surface. The rolls could not be too big (or they would break when opened for reading); a long poem like the Iliad might require as many as twenty-four—in fact it is possible the so-called books of our text represent an original division into papyrus rolls.

In this form the poem was known to the scholars who edited it and wrote commentaries on it in Alexandria, the city founded by Alexander before he set out on his epic march to India in the late fourth century B.C. And it was in this form (though, before the Alexandrian scholars made a standard edition, with many variations from one text to another) that copies were to be found all over the Greek world of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. There must have been texts in circulation in the sixth century too, for we hear of official recitations at Athens and find echoes of Homer in sixth-century poets. In the seventh century B.C., we are moving back into the dark. In the poets of this century (whose work survives only in fragments) there are epithets, phrases and even half-lines that are also common in Homer. Though these poets—Tyrtaeus, Callinus, Alcman and Archilochus—may be using tags common to a general epic tradition, it seems more likely that these echoes betray acquaintance with the work we know as Homer's. There is also a vase, discovered on the island of Ischia, off the coast of Naples, and dated to
before 700 B.C., which has an inscription that seems to refer to the famous cup of Nestor described in our *Iliad* (11.745–53). And echoes in art are also found in the early seventh century—illustrations of scenes from the *Odyssey*, for example, on vases dated in the 670s.

But back beyond about 700 B.C. we cannot go. Evidence for this period is rare; in fact we know very little about Greece in the eighth century, still less, if possible, about Greece in the ninth. All we have is the archaeological record—geometric pots, graves, some weapons. It is the era of Greek history known, because of our almost total ignorance about it, as the Dark Age.

All we have is the tradition, what the Greeks of historical times believed they knew about Homer. Herodotus believed that he lived four hundred years, not more, before his own time; that would put him in the ninth century. The great Homeric scholar Aristarchus of Alexandria believed that he lived about 140 years after the Trojan War; since the Trojan War was generally dated (in our terms) around 1200 B.C., Aristarchus' Homer was much earlier than the Homer of Herodotus. Men might disagree about his date, but everyone believed that he was blind, and though some thought he came from Chios (a so-called Homeric hymn mentions a blind singer from Chios), others traced his origin to Smyrna. It was also generally assumed that Homer, though he speaks of singing and probably did sing in performance, was a poet using the same means of composition as his fifth-century successors—that is, writing. Even those who thought that his poems were not combined into their present shape until long after his death (that, for example, the last part of the *Odyssey* is a later addition), even those who believed that different poets wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the so-called Separatists—everyone assumed that Homer was a poet composing as all poets since have done: with the aid of writing. And so did all succeeding centuries down to the eighteenth. Pope, whose translation of the *Iliad* is the finest ever made, speaks of Homer as if he were a poet like Milton or Shakespeare or himself. "HOMER," so begins his Preface, "is universally allow'd to have had the greatest Invention of any Writer whatever . . .

Homer, it is taken for granted, wrote.

There had been one skeptic in the ancient world who thought differently. He was not a Greek but a Jew, Joseph ben Matthias. He wrote in Greek (for which, as he admits, he had a little help) a history of the Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in the first century A.D. and its savage repression by the emperor Titus—events in which he had played a prominent role. But he also wrote a pamphlet, countering the claim of a Greek writer, Apion, that the Jews had no history to speak of, since
they were hardly mentioned in the works of Greek historians. Besides defending the historicity of the Old Testament chronicles, Josephus (to give him his Greek name) counterattacked by pointing out that the Greeks did not learn to write until very late in their history. The heroes of the Trojan War were "ignorant of the present-day mode of writing," he said, and even Homer "did not leave his poems in writing"; his separate songs were "transmitted by memory" and "not unified until much later."

It is true that (with one remarkable exception, which is discussed later) no one in the Iliad—or, for that matter, the Odyssey—knows how to read or write. The Mycenaean scribes had used the complicated Linear B syllabary—eighty-seven signs for different combinations of consonant and vowel. It was a system only professional scribes could handle; in any case, all memory of it was lost with the destruction of the Mycenaean centers in the twelfth century B.C. The Greeks did not learn to write again until much later. This time, they took over an alphabet of fewer than twenty-five letters from the Phoenicians, a Semitic people whose merchant ships, sailing from their cities Tyre and Sidon on the Palestinian coast, reached every island and harbor of the Mediterranean Sea. The Phoenician alphabet consisted of signs for consonants only. The Greeks appropriated their symbols (Alpha and Beta are meaningless words in Greek, but their Phoenician equivalents, Aleph and Beth, mean "ox" and "house"), but by assigning some of the letters to the vowels, they created the first efficient alphabet, a letter system that provided one, and only one, sign for each sound in the language.

Just when this creative adaptation took place is a subject of scholarly disagreement. Some of the letter shapes of the earliest Greek inscriptions look as if they had been copied from Phoenician scripts that date from as far back as the twelfth century. On the other hand, the earliest examples of Greek alphabetic writing, scratched or painted on broken pottery and found all over the Greek world from Rhodes in the east to Ischia off the coast of Naples in the west, are dated, by their archaeological contexts, to the last half of the eighth century B.C.

But it was not until the eighteenth century that the possibility of Homeric illiteracy was once again proposed. The English traveler Robert Wood, in his Essay on the Original Genius of Homer (1769), suggested that Homer had been as illiterate as his own Achilles and Odysseus. The German scholar F. A. Wolf elaborated the theory in a learned discourse entitled Prolegomena ad Homerum, and the Homeric Question was launched on its long and complicated career. For if Homer was illiterate, Wolf declared, he could not possibly have composed poems as long as
the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; he must have left behind him shorter, ballad-like poems which, preserved by memory, were later (much later, in Wolf's opinion) put together in something like the form we now possess. Wolf's thesis was almost universally accepted as soon as published. It came at the right time. Almost a century before this, the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico had claimed that the Homeric poems were not the creation of one man but of the whole Greek people. The spirit of the age now sought to find works of untutored genius, songs and ballads, the expression of a people's communal imagination—a contrast to the artificial culture and literature of the Age of Reason. The Romantic rebellion was at hand. Everywhere in Europe scholars began to collect, record and edit popular song, ballad, epic—the German *Nibelungenlied*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. And this was the age that saw the popularity, especially in Germany and France, of a forged collective bardic epic: the story of Ossian, a Gaelic hero, translated from the original Gaelic and collected in the Highlands by James Macpherson. In spite of the fact that Macpherson was never able to produce the originals, "Ossian" was admired by Goethe and Schiller; it was the favorite book of Napoleon Bonaparte. They should have listened to Samuel Johnson, who called the book "as gross an imposition as ever the world was troubled with."

In such an atmosphere of enthusiasm for folk poetry the discovery of a primitive Homer was more than welcome. And scholars, convinced that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* consisted of ancient shorter poems which had been sewn together by later compilers and editors, now addressed with enthusiasm the task of deconstruction, of picking out the stitches and isolating the original "lays" or "ballads" in their primitive, pure beauty. The exercise continued throughout the whole of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.

It continued because of course no two scholars could agree about how to take the poems apart. This was understandable, since the criteria they were using—inconsistency of character, imbalance of structure, irrelevance of theme or incident, clumsiness of transition—are notoriously subjective. At first the affair was a free-for-all; it seemed almost as if there were a competition to see who could find the greatest number of separate ballads. Karl Lachmann, in the mid-nineteenth century, after claiming that the newly discovered *Nibelungenlied* was a mosaic of short ballads (a theory now believed by no one), went on to divide the *Iliad* into eighteen original heroic songs. A similar theory of the origin of the *Chanson de Roland* was popular at about the same time. The idea was not as impossible as it now sounds; in fact, a contemporary of Lachmann,
Homer: The Iliad

the Finnish scholar and poet Lönrott, collected Finnish ballads on his travels as a country doctor in the most backward parts of the country and put them together to form the great Finnish epic, the Kalevala, a poem that has ever since been the foundation of the Finnish national consciousness. But Lachmann's analytical methods produced no agreement, only scholarly squabbles, conducted with the customary venom, about how long the pieces should be and exactly where to use the knife.

A different approach to the problem was to claim that there was one original, fairly long poem, The Wrath of Achilles, not too long to have been composed orally and transmitted by memory, and that over the centuries additions were made—a theory of accretion. The most convincing champion of this theory was the English Liberal banker and historian George Grote, whose great History of Greece is still a classic in the field. He announced firmly that no history in the modern sense of the word could be written for Greece before the middle of the eighth century—there was no evidence. But since what the Greeks believed about those dark ages was all-important for their later ideas and actions, he devoted the first twenty-one chapters of his ten-volume work (published in 1846) to what he calls “Legendary Greece.” And he there proposed that the original core of the Iliad was a short “Wrath of Achilles” containing what we now know as Books 1, 8 and 11 to 22 of the poem. In this short Iliad, he claimed, “the series of events is more rapid, more unbroken and more intimately knit together in the way of cause and effect than in the other books.” Grote's original Iliad—Ur-Ilias as the Germans soon began to call it—is very different from ours. It contains the quarrel between the chieftains (Book 1), the rout of the Greeks and Zeus's warning to the gods not to interfere (Book 8), the Trojan attack on the ships, the death of Patroclus, the reentry of Achilles into the fighting, the death of Hector. And there it stops. No meeting of Hector and Andromache at the Scaean Gates (Book 6), no embassy to Achilles (Book 9), no journey of Priam to ransom Hector's body (Book 24). A harsher, more savage poem; the humane touches, said Grote, belong to a later, more civilized age. This theory too could not be summarily dismissed; it seems likely that this is precisely how the great French medieval epic, the Chanson de Roland, had grown to its present size—from an original song commemorating the death of impetuous Roland and wise Oliver in a rearguard engagement at Roncevalles, fighting the Mohammedan infidels, to a vast epic which, reaching its final form at the end of the twelfth century, reflected the spirit of the Crusades.

The nineteenth century was the age that saw the birth of the scientific historical spirit. And also of the history of language—the discipline of
linguistics. All this had a bearing on the problem. If in fact some sections of the *Iliad* were older than others, they should contain linguistic features characteristic of an earlier stage of the language than that to be found in the more recent additions. Similarly, the later parts of the poem should contain allusions to customs, laws, objects and ideas belonging to the later historical period and vice-versa. Toward the end of the century a fresh criterion emerged for gauging the antiquity of different sections of the poem—the archaeological criterion. For with Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations at Troy and Mycenae, and those of Sir Arthur Evans at Cnossos, a previously unknown civilization was revealed. If there was any historicity to Homer’s account of the Achaean world which organized the attack on Troy, it must be a reference to this world—a world of gold masks, bronze weapons, palaces and fortifications—not to the archaeologically poverty-stricken Greece of the Dark Age. Now, by finding in Homer descriptions of objects that corresponded to something excavated from a Bronze Age site, the scholar could date a passage, because it was clear that with the destruction of the Mycenaean and Minoan palaces, all memory of that age had disappeared in Greece. Schliemann and Evans had discovered things Herodotus and Thucydides had no idea of.

Of these three approaches, the linguistic seemed the most promising, the most likely to yield objective criteria. Studies of the origins of Greek in the Indo-European family of languages had progressed along generally agreed and scientific lines: the history of the Greek language and the Greek dialects had become an exact discipline. Surely the linguistic analysis of the text would confirm or refute theories of earlier and later strata in the poems.

The language of Homer is of course a problem in itself. One thing is certain: it is not a language that anyone ever spoke. It is an artificial, poetic language—as the German scholar Witte puts it: “The language of the Homeric poems is a creation of epic verse.” It was also a difficult language. For the Greeks of the great age, that fifth century we inevitably think of when we say “the Greeks,” the idiom of Homer was far from limpid (they had to learn the meaning of long lists of obscure words at school), and it was brimful of archaisms—of vocabulary, syntax and grammar—and of incongruities: words and forms drawn from different dialects and different stages of the growth of the language. In fact, the language of Homer was one nobody, except epic bards, oracular priests or literary parodists would dream of using.

This does not mean that Homer was a poet known only to scholars and schoolboys; on the contrary the Homeric epics were familiar as
household words in the mouths of ordinary Greeks. They maintained their hold on the tongues and imaginations of the Greeks by their superb literary quality—the simplicity, speed and directness of the narrative technique, the brilliance and excitement of the action, the greatness and imposing humanity of the characters—and by the fact that they presented the Greek people, in memorable form, with the images of their gods and the ethical, political and practical wisdom of their cultural tradition. Homer was thus at once contemporary in content and antique in form. The texture of Homeric epic was for the classic age of Greece like that of the Elgin Marbles for us—weathered by time but speaking to us directly: august, authoritative, inimitable, a vision of life fixed forever in forms that seem to have been molded by gods rather than men.

The language of Homer is the "creation of epic verse" in a strict sense too: it is created, adapted and shaped to fit the epic meter, the hexameter. This is a line, as its name indicates, of six metrical units, which may, to put it crudely, be either dactyls (a long plus two shorts) or spondees (two longs) in the first four places but must be dactyl and spondee in that order in the last two (rarely spondee and spondee, never spondee followed by dactyl). The syllables are literally long and short: the meter is based on pronunciation time, not, as in our language, on stress. But unlike most English verse, the meter does not allow departures from the basic norms—such phenomena as the Shakespearean variations on the basic blank verse line, still less the subtleties of Eliot’s prosody in The Waste Land.

Yet though it is always metrically regular, it never becomes monotonous; its internal variety guarantees that. This regularity imposed on variety is Homer’s great metrical secret, the strongest weapon in his poetic arsenal. The long line, which no matter how it varies in the opening and middle always ends in the same way, builds up its hypnotic effect in book after book, imposing on things and men and gods the same pattern, presenting in a rhythmic microcosm the wandering course to a fixed end which is the pattern of the rage of Achilles and the travels of Odysseus of all natural phenomena and all human destinies.

The meter itself demands a special vocabulary, for many combinations of long and short syllables that are common in the spoken language cannot be admitted to the line—any word with three consecutive short syllables, for example, any word with one short syllable between two longs. This difficulty was met by choosing freely among the many variations of pronunciation and prosody afforded by Greek dialectal differences; the epic language is a mixture of dialects. Under a light patina
of Attic forms (easily removable and clearly due to the preeminence of Athens as a literary center and then of the book trade) there is an indissoluble mixture of two different dialects, Aeolic and Ionic. But the attempts of the linguists to use this criterion for early (Aeolic) and late (Ionic) ran into the dilemma that Aeolic and Ionic forms sometimes appear inextricably tangled in the same line or half-line. Much was hoped from the use of the digamma as a criterion. This was a letter, representing the sound we represent by \( w \), that disappeared from the Greek alphabet early on, as the consonant ceased to be sounded in the spoken language. Unfortunately, in many cases the relative dates assigned to passages on this basis conflicted with the data suggested by other criteria. In a passage in Book 23, for example, the meter shows that the word ergon was pronounced in its older form, \((w)ergon\) (it means "work" and in fact is from the same Indo-European root as our word). This would indicate that the account of the funeral games of Patroclus in Book 23 is one of the oldest parts of the poem. In Book 14 there is a passage that contains the same word, but this time the presence of the digamma would disrupt the meter: Book 14 then must be late. But this runs counter to Grote's theory; for him, Book 23 is part of the late addition and Book 14 is very old, part of the "original" *Iliad*. This example is one among many; Homer uses or discards the digamma at will. There is no way of isolating different strata on this basis.

The attempts to dissect the *Iliad* along historical lines were no more satisfactory (except of course to their authors). There are indeed passages which seem to imply different historical backgrounds, but they are not passages that are identifiable as early or late by the criteria of linguistic difference or structural analysis. All through the poems, for example, the weapons and arms of the heroes are bronze; this was the Bronze Age. Iron is mentioned but as a precious metal (as one would expect during the early years of its appearance on the scene); in Book 23 a piece of iron is offered by Achilles as a prize for the weight-throwing contest. Yet in the fourth book the Trojan archer Pandarus has an iron arrowhead, mentioned quite casually as if that were normal. Arrowheads are not things you expect to get back once you have shot them—they are, to use a military cliche, expendable. In this passage iron is obviously cheap. Book 4 also presents us with a simile in which a man fells a poplar tree with an iron ax; elsewhere we meet proverbial phrases like "heart hard as iron," which indicate complete familiarity with the metal. It certainly looks as if these are different historical layers, but once again, there is no way to extract them. Book 23 for example, which contains the reference to iron as a valuable rarity, is considered a late
addition by the believers in an *Ur-Ilias*. And so with many other historical discrepancies—horseback riding only in Book 10 and in similes; twin-horse chariots in every battle except those of Books 8 and 11, where we find four-horse chariots; trumpets mentioned in similes but never employed in the action; fishing mentioned in similes, but none of the heroes ever eats fish (though they are encamped on the shore). Most of the shields are round but Ajax has a huge one like a tower. This sounds like the strange body-shield seen on some of the Mycenaean frescoes. Can Ajax be an older, Mycenaean component of the epic? Hardly, for Hector is described as having the same shield.

Historical analysis, then, fails to account for the amalgam, and the high hopes aroused by archaeology soon faded too. There are not many objects in Homer that resemble anything discovered by the spade of the excavator. Two stand out. One is the cup of Nestor described in Book 11 (745–53), which has some resemblance to (and some differences from) a cup found at Mycenae by Schliemann. The other is a remarkable helmet: "a helmet made of leather / . . . outside the gleaming teeth of a white-tusked boar / ran round and round in rows stitched neat and tight" (10.305–8). Such helmets, and artistic representations of them, have been found at Mycenaean sites on Crete, at Mycenae, on Delos, but never in late archaeological contexts. Here there seems to be a genuine memory of the Bronze Age. But it is found in Book 10, the one book every so-called Analyst agrees must be a late addition to the original poem.

It is not surprising, in view of such frustrating results, that by the beginning of the twentieth century, opinion had begun to swing away from analysis and to concentrate on the qualities of the poem itself, to stress the unity of the main action rather than the digressions and inconsistencies, above all to explore the elaborate correspondences of structure that often link scene to scene. The architecture of the poem is magnificent, and it strongly suggests the hand of one composer, but it is true that there is a certain roughness in the details of the execution. The poem does contain, in an indissoluble amalgam, material that seems linguistically and historically to span many centuries. And it does contain long digressions, and some disconcerting inconsistencies, some weaknesses of construction. What sort of poet composed it, and how did he work?

The answer was supplied by an American scholar, whose name was Milman Parry. Parry, who came from California and was an assistant professor at Harvard when he was killed in a gun accident at an early age, did his most significant work in Paris; in fact, he wrote it in French.
It has only recently been translated, by his son, Adam, who met an equally tragic end, also at an early age. Milman Parry's work was not appreciated or even fully understood until after his death; but once understood, it radically altered the terms of the problem.

Parry's achievement was to prove that Homer was a master of and heir to a tradition of oral epic poetry that reached back over many generations, perhaps even centuries. He drew attention to the so-called ornamental epithets, those long high-sounding labels that accompany every appearance of a hero, a god, or even a familiar object. Agamemnon, for example, is "lord of men" or "wide-ruling," Achilles is "brilliant," "godlike" or "swift-footed," Apollo is "one who shoots from afar," the Achaeans are "strong-greaved" or "bronze-cloaked," Hera is "white-armed" and ships are "black," "round," "hollow" or "swift." These recurring epithets had of course been noticed before Parry, and their usefulness understood. They offer, for each god, hero or object, a choice of epithets, each one with a different metrical shape. In other words, the particular epithet chosen by the poet may have nothing to do with, for example, whether Achilles is "brilliant" or "swift-footed" at this particular point in the poem—the choice depends on which epithet fits the meter.

Parry pursued this insight of the German analytical scholars to its logical end and demonstrated that in fact there was an intricate system of metrical alternatives for the recurring names of heroes, gods and objects. It was a system that was economical—hardly any unnecessary alternatives—but had great scope—there was a way to fit the names into the line in any of the usual grammatical forms they would assume. Parry demonstrated that the system was more extensive and highly organized than anyone had dreamed, and he also realized what it meant. It meant that this system had been developed by and for the use of oral poets who improvised. In Paris he met scholars who had studied such improvising illiterate bards still performing in Yugoslavia. He went there to study their operations himself.

The Homeric epithets were created to meet the demands of the meter of Greek heroic poetry, the dactylic hexameter. They offer the improvising bard different ways of fitting the name of his god, hero or object into whatever section of the line is left after he has, so to speak, filled up the first half (that too, quite possibly, with another formulaic phrase). The Achaeans, for example—one of the names used for the Greeks, Achaioi—are often "strong-greaved": ἑυκνήμιδης Ἀχαῖοι, a line ending. "Stay your ground, all of you strong-greaved Achaeans," says the prophet Calchas, encouraging the troops: ἀλλ' ἄγε, μὴνεἶλε πᾶντες, ἑυ-
knêmídes Ἄchaiōi. A few lines earlier, however, he has asked them, "Why have you fallen silent?": tipt' ánēō ēgēnēsthē . . . How will the bard finish this line? Ēuknêmídes Ἄchaiōi will fit the meter, for the two opening phrases are of the same metrical length. But it will produce a junction of two short open vowels: ēgēnēsthē ēuknêmídes Ἄchaiōi. and this usually results in elision, the suppression of one of the two short vowels—ēgēnēsthē ēuknêmídes—an unacceptable metrical combination. The solution is simple. The Achaeans cease to be "strong-greaved" and become "long-haired"—a formula starting with a consonant, which avoids the hiatus: tipt' ánēō ēgēnēsthē, kārē kōmōōntēs Ἄchaiōi. The bard may also need to fit the Achaeans into a different part of the line and in a different grammatical case. In Book 7, for example, the gods watch the Greeks toil and suffer in the battle. "So they toiled . . ."—hōs hoi mēn pōnēōntō—"the long-haired Achaeans"—kārē kōmōōntēs Ἄchaiōi (not "strong-greaved")—that would have produced elision: pōnēōnti ēuknêmídes). Two lines later, however, "the gods, seated by Zeus of the lightning bolt, watched the great labor"—mēgā ἐrgōn—"of the Achaeans": Ἀchaiōn—genitive case. To fill the rest of this line the bard needs an epithet of the form — — — —. The Achaeans can't be "strong-greaved" or "long-haired," then; they have to be "bronze-cloaked": chálkōchitōnōn. The choice of the epithet is dictated by the meter. Agamemnon is "shepherd of the people," "lord of men," "son of Atreus," "wide-ruling" or "brilliant" according to his grammatical case and his position in the line. So for Achilles and Zeus, Hera and Hector. As for ships, their position in the line and case determines whether they are "black," "round," "sea-going" or "well-benched."

This system, obviously the product of invention, refinement and elimination of superfluities over generations, could only be the work of oral bards, and in fact similar phenomena, though infinitely less sophisticated, are found in oral poetry, living and dead, in other languages. There was more to it, of course, than handy epithets. Whole lines, once honed to perfection by the bards of the tradition, became part of the repertoire; they are especially noticeable in recurring passages like descriptions of sacrifice, of communal eating and drinking. Such passages give the oral singer time to concentrate on what is coming next, and if he is a creative oral poet, to elaborate his own phrases mentally as he recites the formulas that he can sing without effort. He is helped, too, by the formulaic nature of whole themes, great type-scenes—the arming of the warrior for battle, the duels of the champions, the assembly of the warriors. These are traditional patterns which the audience expects and the bard may vary but not radically change.
There is one aspect of Parry's discovery, however, that changed the whole problem of the nature of our Homeric text. The oral bard who uses such formulaic language is not, as scholars in the nineteenth century who struggled with the problem of illiterate bards all assumed, a poet reciting from memory a fixed text. He is improvising, along known lines, relying on a huge stock of formulaic phrases, lines and even whole scenes; but he is improvising. And every time he sings the poem, he does it differently. The outline remains the same but the text, the oral text, is flexible. The poem is new every time it is performed.

If Homer's poetry is the culmination of a long tradition of such oral composition, many of the problems that bedeviled the Analysts are solved. Over the course of generations of trial and error, formulas are introduced and rejected or retained for their usefulness in improvisation, without regard to linguistic consistency or historical accuracy. The language of the poets becomes a repository of all the combinations that have proved useful. Small wonder that Aeolic and Ionic forms appear in the same line, that a Mycenaean boar-tusk helmet can turn up in a passage full of very late linguistic forms, that people sometimes give dowries and sometimes demand payment for their daughter's hand, that cremation and inhumation are practiced side by side. As each new generation of singers recreates the song, new formulas may be created, new themes and scenes introduced; reflections of contemporary reality creep into descriptions of the fighting, especially into the similes. But the dedication of epic poetry to the past and the continuing usefulness of so much traditional phraseology will slow the process of modernization and produce the unhistorical amalgam of customs, objects and linguistic forms that we find in our Homeric text.

It is the fate of most new and valuable insights to be enthusiastically developed beyond the limits of certainty, or even of probability, and Parry's demonstration that Homeric poetry had an oral base has not escaped that fate. Phrases, even whole lines, that are repeated often enough to qualify as formulaic are indeed characteristic of the poet's diction, but they do not account for more than a part of it—about one third of the whole. In an attempt to raise the formulaic element to a higher level, Parry counted as formulas expressions whose metrical pattern and position in the line were identical and which contained one word in common: for example, tēuchē ēthēkē; ēlgē' ēthēkē; kūdōs ēthēkē—he "put" the arms, the sorrows, the glory on. Not content with this, Parry went on to suggest, hesitantly, the inclusion in the system of similar expressions which, however, did not contain one word in common: dōken hētairō, for example, and tēuchē kūnēssin—"he gave to his com-
"trade."

"he made [him prey] for the dogs." Some of Parry's followers have been less hesitant, and by this and other extensions of the meaning of "formula" have boosted the inherited content of Homer's verse to ninety percent. This of course leaves very little room for Homer as an individual creative poet. It seems in fact to be a return to the idea of Giambattista Vico: the poems are the creation of a people, of a tradition, of generations of nameless bards.

But the argument for full formularity has feet of clay. A poet composing in a strict, demanding meter is bound to repeat syntactical combinations in identical positions and the stricter the meter, the higher the incidence of such repeated patterns. English has no meters as precisely demanding as Homer's, but Alexander Pope, to take an example, is rich in lines that by strict Parryite standards would qualify him as an illiterate bard. For example:

The Smiles of Harlots, and the Tears of Heirs
The Fate of Louis and the Fall of Rome

Proclaim their Motions, and provoke the War
Maintain thy Honours, and enlarge thy Fame

The shining Helmet, and the pointed Spears
The silver Token, and the circled Green

Weak was his Pace, but dauntless was his Heart
Lame are their Feet, and wrinkled is their Face

Samuel Johnson, in fact, wrote a description of Pope's technique that has more than a little resemblance to Parry's conception of the oral poet. "By perpetual practice, language had in his mind a systematical arrangement; having always the same use for words, he had words so selected and combined as to be ready at his call."

Extravagant claims for the predominance of formula in Homeric poetry have now been generally discounted, and even Parry's basic theses have been shown to need modification in the light of later examination. There are many cases, for example, where a truly formulaic epithet does in fact seem to be poetically functional in its context. There are cases where verbal repetition is so poetically effective that it must be the result of poetic design rather than the working of a quasi-mechanical system. Careful investigation of the type-scenes—the ceremony of sacrifice, the arming of the warrior, and so on—has revealed that although sometimes whole verses are repeated from one scene to another, no two scenes
are exactly similar. "Each occurrence," to quote a recent evaluation (Edwards, p. 72), "is unique, and often specifically adapted to its context." Even the basic concept of economy, the strict limitation of the epithets for one god or hero to those needed in different cases and positions, has been questioned: a recent study shows that in his analysis of the epithets for Achilles, Parry considered only the phrases containing the hero's name, ignoring other ways of identifying Achilles, such as "Peleus' son" (Shive, passim). All this, together with the monumental scale and the magnificent architecture of the Iliad, makes the image of Homer as an illiterate bard, totally dependent on ready-made formulas and stock scenes for improvised performance, hard to accept.

There is nevertheless fairly general agreement that Parry was right in one thing: Homer's unique style does show clearly that he was heir to a long tradition of oral poetry. But there is one problem that Parry raised but did not solve: Homer may or may not have been as illiterate as his forerunners, but at some time the Iliad and Odyssey were written down. When, by whom, for what purpose and in what circumstances was this done?

The most likely date for the composition of the Iliad is the fifty years running from 725 to 675 B.C. That is also the time to which the earliest examples of Greek alphabetic writing can be dated. Did Homer take advantage of the new technique to record for future singers the huge poem he had composed without the aid of writing? Did writing perhaps play a role in its composition? To both these questions Parry's collaborator and successor, Albert Lord, gave an emphatically negative answer. "The two techniques are... mutually exclusive... It is conceivable that a man might be an oral poet in his younger years and a written poet later in life, but it is not possible that he be both an oral and a written poet at any given time in his career" (p. 129). Lord based this assertion on his experience with Yugoslav oral poets who, when they came into contact with literate urban societies, lost their gift for improvised recitation. He envisaged a Homer, an oral bard at the height of his powers, who dictated his poem to a scribe, one who had mastered the new art of writing. This was of course how the songs of the illiterate Yugoslav bards had been written down (sometimes with the aid of recording equipment sophisticated for its time) by Parry and Lord.

This scenario did not satisfy everyone. The analogy with modern Yugoslavia, for example, was flawed. When the bards there learned to read and write, they were immediately exposed to the corrupting influence of newspapers, magazines and cheap fiction, but if Homer learned to write in the late eighth century, there was little or nothing for him
to read. Lord's generalization about the incompatibility of the two techniques has been questioned by students of oral poetry; in other parts of the world (particularly in Africa), they find no such dichotomy. "The basic point... is the continuity of oral and written literature. There is no deep gulf between the two: they shade into each other both in the present and over many centuries of historical development, and there are innumerable cases of poetry which has both 'oral' and 'written' elements" (Finnegan, p. 24). Furthermore, the extant specimens of alphabetic writing of the eighth and early seventh centuries B.C. make it hard to believe in a scribe of the period who could take dictation at or, for that matter, anywhere near performance speed: the letters are free-standing capitals, crudely and laboriously formed, written from right to left or from right to left and left to right on alternate lines. One critic, in fact, irreverently conjured up a picture of Homer dictating the first line (or rather the first half-line) of the Iliad: "Mēnēn aēide thea... You got that?"

A different scenario for the transition from oral performance to written text was developed by Geoffrey Kirk. The epics were the work of an oral "monumental composer," whose version imposed itself on bards and audiences as the definitive version. They "then passed through at least a couple of generations of transmission by decadent and quasi-literate singers and rhapsodes" (Kirk, Commentary, I, 1985, p. xxv)—that is, performers who were not themselves poets. Lord's objection to this, that memorization plays no part in the living oral tradition, was based on Yugoslav experience, but elsewhere—in Somalia, for example—very long poems are recited from memory by professional reciters who are themselves, in many cases, poets.

What neither of these theories explains, however, is the immense length of the poem. Why should an oral, illiterate poet, whose poetry exists only in its performance before an audience, create a poem so long that it would take several days to perform? For that matter, if his poetry existed only in performance, how could he create a poem of such length? If, on the other hand, he delivered different sections of it at different times and places, how could he have elaborated the variations on theme and formula and the inner structural correspondences that distinguish the Homeric epics so sharply from the Yugoslav texts collected by Parry and Lord?

It is not surprising that many recent scholars in the field have come to the conclusion that writing did indeed play a role in the creation of these extraordinary poems, that the phenomena characteristic of oral epic demonstrated by Parry and Lord are balanced by qualities peculiar
to literary composition. They envisage a highly creative oral poet, master of the repertoire of inherited material and technique, who used the new instrument of writing to build, probably over the course of a lifetime, an epic poem on a scale beyond the imagination of his predecessors.

The last half of the eighth century was the time in which writing was coming into use all over the Greek world. Homer must have known of its existence, but the traditional nature of his material naturally forbade its appearance in the relentlessly archaic world of his heroes, who belonged to the time when men were stronger, braver and greater than men are now, a world in which men and gods spoke face-to-face. Even so, Homer does show, in one particular instance, that he was conscious of the new technique. In Book 6 Glaucus tells the story of his grandfather Bellerophon. Proetus, king of Argos, sent him off with a message to the king of Lycia, Proetus' father-in-law; it instructed the king to kill the bearer. "[He] gave him tokens, / murderous signs, scratched in a folded tablet . . . " (6.198–99). There has been much discussion about the nature of these signs but the word Homer uses—grapsas, literally "scratching"—is later the normal word used for "writing," and pinax—"tablet"—is the word used by later Greeks to describe the wooden boards coated with wax that were used for short notes.

If Homer could write, what did he write on? Obviously "tablets" would not be adequate. We do not know when papyrus, the paper of the ancient world, was first available in Greece, though we do know that it came at first not from its almost exclusive source, Egypt—which was not opened to Greek merchants until the sixth century B.C.—but from the Phoenician port the Greeks called Byblos (the Greek word for book was biblion—our "Bible"). Archaeological evidence for Phoenician imports into Greece dates from the ninth century B.C. and Phoenician traders are mentioned in the Iliad (23.828) and their operations described with a wealth of detail in the Odyssey. But even if papyrus was not available in quantity, there were other materials, such as animal skins. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century B.C., says that in his time the Ionian Greeks still used the word diphthera—"skin"—when they meant "book."

The crudity of the script in the eighth century meant that writing was a laborious business. If Homer did use writing in the composition of the poem, it is likely that the process extended over many years. Episodes from the tale of Achilles' rage and its consequences would be brought to near perfection in oral performance and then written down; gradually a complete text would be assembled, to be refined in detail and extended by insertions. The text contains in fact one example of such second
thoughts, the inclusion of Phoenix in the embassy to Achilles in Book 9.

Nestor chooses three ambassadors to go to Achilles' tent and urge him to rejoin the Achaean ranks: they are Phoenix, Ajax and Odysseus. Phoenix, we learn later in the poem, was not only commander of one of Achilles' five regiments of Myrmidons but also the older man who brought him up from boyhood. What is he doing in the Achaean camp? Why is he not with Achilles and the Myrmidons, preparing to leave Troy? No explanation is offered and as the ambassadors leave on their mission more puzzles emerge. For the whole extent of the passage describing their journey and Achilles' greeting when they reach his tent, the verbal and adjectival forms applied to them are not, as we would expect, plural; they are dual, a special Greek termination system that indicates firmly that two and no more than two people are concerned. It looks as if an original version had only two ambassadors and that Phoenix was added later—to make the longest, most affecting and most effective of the three appeals to Achilles. Homer added Phoenix to an original version but forgot not only to explain his presence in Agamemnon's council but also to amend the dual forms.

The surprising thing is that they stayed in the text. If Homer, as in Lord's model, had dictated his poem to a scribe, he could hardly have failed to notice the discrepancy and correct it. In fact Lord records such corrections in the course of dictation in Yugoslavia. In this case correction would have been easy; any oral bard could rework the lines to substitute plural forms for dual (so, for that matter, can any modern scholar familiar with Homeric diction). And it seems hard to imagine the lines going uncorrected in Kirk's scenario of a monumental poem preserved by recitation for a generation or two before being written down. Any rhapsode (and in the earlier generation they would have been oral poets themselves) could have corrected the lines without effort and would have seen no reason not to do so. There seems to be only one possible explanation of the survival of these dual forms in the text: that the text was regarded as authentic, the exact words of Homer himself. And that can only mean that there was a written copy.

This is of course pure speculation, but so are all other attempts to explain the origin of the text that has come down to us. We shall never be able to answer the questions it raises with any certainty and must rest content with the fact that a great poet marshaled the resources of an age-old traditional art to create something new—the epic of Achilles' rage and Hector's death, which has been a model for epic poetry ever since.
THE TROJAN WAR

The background of the rage of Achilles is a war between the assembled armies of the Achaean cities and Troy, a rich, fortified city on the coast of Asia Minor near the Hellespont, the narrow western outlet of the long passage from the Black Sea to the Aegean. For the Greeks of later ages, the *Iliad* was history. Even Thucydides, who cast a critical eye on accounts of past ages, accepted the Pan-Achaean expedition against Troy, though he thought that Homer exaggerated its size and importance. It was not until the nineteenth century that the historicity of Homer's war was seriously questioned; Grote, for one, dismissed any "history" of events before 776 B.C. (the foundation date of the Olympic Games and of the calendar based on its recurrence every fourth year) as mere legend. But Schliemann's excavations at Troy and Mycenae, as well as other sites mentioned in Homer, revealed a previously unsuspected Bronze Age civilization; its bronze armor, its weapons and many particular objects—a cup like Nestor's, for example—seemed to correspond to Homer's descriptions, and its approximate date (determined by archaeological evidence) seemed to coincide with the date assigned by ancient Greek scholars to the Trojan War. When in the 1950s the inscriptions on clay tablets found on the Mycenaean site at Pylos, as well as on the Minoan site of Cnossos in Crete, were deciphered as Greek, a very archaic stage of the language that had some close correspondences with Homeric Greek, the historicity of Homer's *Iliad* seemed to be something only a hard-line skeptic could deny.

But skeptics there were (the late Sir Moses Finley among them) and their doubts soon proved to be well grounded. The tablets were for the most part inventory lists: quantities of olives, spices, wheat, records of land leases, registers of personnel, reserves of chariots, some of them recorded as broken. They are the day-to-day ledger entries of a bureaucratic monarchy that has its counterparts in the kingdoms of the Near East but has little to do with the world of piratical chieftains on the beachhead of Troy. There are Homeric names on the tablets, but though some of them are Achaean (Orestes, Adrastus), others are Trojan (Tros, Hector), and Hector, far from being a warrior prince, is a "servant of the god" and "holds a lease." As for the fire-blackened seventh layer of Schliemann's excavations at Hissarlik (the archaeologists' candidate for Homer's Troy), it can tell us nothing about its destruction—which may have been the result of earthquake rather than siege and sack. It is only one of many cities all over the Near East that went down to destruction in the late Bronze Age. The only evidence that its destroyers
were an Achaean army led by the lords of Mycenae and all the cities listed in the Achaean catalogue in Book 2 of the Iliad is the poem itself, a poem that is supposed to have preserved the memory of these events over the course of some five illiterate centuries.

The epic muse, however, is not the muse of history; her vision of past events is always suspect. The twelfth-century manuscript of the Chanson de Roland, a poem that almost certainly has oral origins, tells the heroic tale of the great invasion of Moslem Spain led by Charlemagne, and of the deaths of Roland and his friend Oliver in the pass of Roncesvalles, where the Frankish rear guard was attacked by Moslem hordes led by beys and pashas. The invasion took place in A.D. 778. Forty years later, Einhard wrote his famous Life of Charlemagne, from which we learn that the rear guard was attacked not by Moslems but by the Basques, who were Christians like the Franks. This substitution does not inspire confidence in oral poetic tradition as a historical source; it would suggest by analogy that the historic core of the Iliad may have been a battle between Trojans and Hittites or a war between Mycenae and Thebes.

But though we may have our doubts, the Greeks of historic times who knew and loved Homer’s poem had none. For them history began with a splendid Panhellenic expedition against an Eastern foe, led by kings and including contingents from all the more than one hundred and fifty places listed in the catalogue in Book 2. History began with a war. That was an appropriate beginning, for the Greek city-states, from their first appearance as organized communities until the loss of their political independence, were almost uninterruptedly at war with one another. The Greek polis, the city-state, was a community surrounded by potential enemies, who could turn into actual belligerents at the first sign of aggression or weakness. The permanence of war is a theme echoed in Greek literature from Homer to Plato. We Achaeans, says Odysseus in the Iliad, are

"the men whom Zeus decrees, from youth to old age, must wind down our brutal wars to the bitter end until we drop and die, down to the last man." (14.105-7)

And in Plato’s Laws the Cretan participant in the discussion says: “Peace is just a name. The truth is that every city-state is, by natural law, engaged in a perpetual undeclared war with every other city-state.” There was no lack of declared wars, either. The citizens of Athens in the great century of Greek civilization, the fifth B.C., were at war, on land and
sea, for more years than they were at peace. In the Louvre in Paris there is an inscription, dating from the early 450s, that lists the names of 171 men of one of the ten Athenian tribes, who died "in war, on Cyprus, in Egypt, in Phoenicia, at Halieis, Aegina, Megara in the same year." Athens at this time was fighting not only the Persian Empire but also her former ally against Persia, Sparta and its Peloponnesian League. She had been fighting the Persians continually since 480 and Sparta since 460. In 448 she made peace with Persia and in 446 with Sparta and the League. But the peace lasted only fifteen years. In 431 the Peloponnesian War began, to end in 404 with the surrender of Athens and the loss of her naval empire.

The fighting Homer describes—duels between chieftains who ride up to the battle line in chariots, dismount, and exchange speeches, sometimes quite long ones, before engaging man-to-man with spear and shield—is clearly a creation of the epic muse rather than a representation of actual battle conditions. The Mycenaeans had chariots in quantity, as Linear B inventories show (over two hundred chariots at Cnossos, for example), but such expensive equipment would have been put to better use, and although hand-to-hand combatants may shout at each other, they do not make speeches. Yet for Homer's later audiences and readers, the combats of heroes in the Iliad did not seem unfamiliar, since Greek battles, for centuries after his time, were fought by armored infantry at close quarters; archers were rare and cavalry was used only in pursuit, after the enemy infantry line had been broken and turned to flight. Though the citizen-soldier of the polis did not fight individual duels but faced the enemy as part of a disciplined line of overlapping shields, he still exchanged spear-thrusts with his opposite number in the opposing phalanx, and he could recognize as the real thing Homer's account of what metal can do to human flesh:

Achilles lunged [at Demoleon] . . .

he stabbed his temple and cleft his helmet's cheekpiece.
None of the bronze plate could hold it—boring through the metal and skull the bronze spearpoint pounded,
Demoleon's brains splattered all inside his casque . . .

(20.449-54)

A few lines later Achilles kills another Trojan:

speared him square in the back where his war-belt clasped,
golden buckles clinching both halves of his breastplate—straight on through went the point and out the navel.
down on his knees he dropped—
screaming shrill as the world went black before him—
clutched his bowels to his body, hunched and sank.  

There is no attempt to gloss over the harsh realities of the work of killing (''work,'' ergon, is one of Homer's words for what men do in battle) and no attempt, either, to sentimentalize the pain and degradation of violent death.

But Meriones caught him in full retreat, he let fly
with a bronze-tipped arrow, hitting his right buttock
up under the pelvic bone so the lance pierced the bladder.
He sank on the spot, hunched in his dear companion's arms,
gasping out his life as he writhed along the ground
like an earthworm stretched out in death, blood pooling,
soaking the earth dark red . . .

Men die in the Iliad in agony; they drop, screaming, to their knees, reaching out to beloved companions, gasping their life out, clawing the ground with their hands; they die roaring, like Asius, raging, like the great Sarpedon, bellowing, like Hippodamas, moaning, like Polydorus.

And death is the end: Homer offers no comforting vision of life beyond the grave. In the Chanson de Roland Archbishop Turpin promises the heroes of Charlemagne's army a place among the blessed, a promise fulfilled in the poem, for when Roland dies an angel and two saints carry his soul to Paradise. For Homer's heroes no such rewarding prospect presents itself. For most of those whose life is violently suppressed in the poem, the formulas used concern themselves simply with the physical destruction of the body, followed by the extinction of life in it: ''and hateful darkness seized him,'' ''darkness engulfed his eyes.''

Where, very rarely, a phrase suggests the departure of the life for some other destination, it is not Paradise but the House of Hades, lord of the dead. Only one soul in the poem comes back from that house: it is Patroclus, whohaunts Achilles' dreams, calling for his burial so that he can rest at last. ''Even in Death's strong house,'' says Achilles, ''there is something left, / a ghost, a phantom—true, but no real breath of life'' (23.122–23). Patroclus is concerned for proper disposal of his body and indeed it is for the body, not the soul, that the Homeric heroes feel concern: many of the champions who fall mortally wounded have been fighting to gain control of the corpse of a prominent foe or to save the corpse of a comrade from the enemy. Archbishop Turpin finally prevails
on Roland to blow his horn and summon Charlemagne by pointing out that though it is now too late for the king to save them, he may be able to bury their bodies in a church and save them from wolves, pigs and dogs. But as is clear from their prayers and from the visitation of the angels who come to take the soul of Roland to Paradise, it is the soul, not the body, that is their real concern. The contrast between the two attitudes is clear to see in the Homeric parallel to the angelic escort that comes for Roland. Zeus sends Apollo to rescue the corpse of his son Sarpedon, almost unrecognizable now since it is “covered over head to toe, / buried under a mass of weapons, blood and dust” (16.743–44). Apollo lifts the body out of the melee, washes the blood off it in a running river, and gives it to the brothers Sleep and Death, who are to transport it to Sarpedon’s home in Lycia for due burial with tomb and gravestone. “These,” says Zeus, “are the solemn honors owed the dead” (16.789). But the poet does not encourage illusions about the fate of the body once the life has gone out of it; if not rescued for burning and burial, it may shrivel in the heat of the sun, it may become food for the birds of the air, the dogs of the earth, the eels and fish of the waters. And if not protected by divine interference, its wounds will be host to flies, which will breed worms.

Nevertheless the Iliad is a poem that celebrates the heroic values war imposes on its votaries. War has its deadly fascination for those who have grown up in its service. “It is well that it is so terrible,” said Lee, as he watched Hooker’s doomed columns start across the river at Fredericksburg. “or we should grow too fond of it.” And though the warriors of the Iliad often rail against their condition, they can also enjoy to the full war’s intoxicating excitements. They revel in the exultation of victory as they taunt a fallen adversary with threats of exposure of his corpse, or with a bitter sarcasm, as when Patroclus mocks one of his victims, who, his face crushed by a stone, dives from his chariot: “Look what a springy man, a nimble, flashy tumbler!” (16.868). Even Hector, by far the most civilized of all the warriors at Troy, can list with pride and a kind of joy his credentials as a seasoned fighter.

“War—I know it well, and the butchery of men.
Well I know, shift to the left, shift to the right
my tough tanned shield. That’s what the real drill,
defensive fighting means to me. I know it all,
how to charge in the rush of plunging horses—
I know how to stand and fight to the finish.
twist and lunge in the War-god’s deadly dance.”

(7.275–81)
And though, in a series of recurrent formulas, war is characterized as "dreadful," "man-killing," "hateful," to list only a few of the epithets, it can also appear, again in a recurrent formula, as "bringing glory to man." Warriors are described as "eager" or even "yearning" for battle, and one of the common words for combat, charmè, comes from the same root as the word chairó—"rejoice." In one passage, in fact, this etymology is emphasized as two warriors, holding the line in a desperate situation, are described as charmèi géthosunoi—"rejoicing in (the joy of) battle."

In some of Homer's descriptions of killing, the victor's joy of battle and the hideous suffering of the victim are evenly balanced. As in the account of the death of an obscure Trojan charioteer, Théstor, who, terrified by the approach of Patroclus,

cowering, crouched in his fine polished chariot,
crazed with fear, and the reins flew from his grip—
Patroclus rising beside him stabbed his right jawbone,
ramming the spearhead square between his teeth so hard
he hooked him by that spearhead over the chariot-rail,
hoisted, dragged the Trojan out as an angler perched
on a jutting rock ledge drags some fish from the sea,
some noble catch, with line and glittering bronze hook.
So with the spear Patroclus gaffed him off his car,
his mouth gaping round the glittering point
and flipped him down facefirst.
dead as he fell, his life breath blown away.  (16.478-89)

The hallucinatory power of this passage stems partly from the deliberate, craftsmanlike way Patroclus delivers his blow, partly from the hypnotized, terror-struck passivity of the victim. Its realism has been questioned: could one man really pull another out of a chariot in this way? Perhaps he could—if the spearhead were triangular and the blunt rear angles of the blade became wedged in the flesh and if, as seems likely, the wounded man would follow the motion of the spear in withdrawal, rather than resisting it. But clearly Homer is walking the borderline of credibility here. He does it for a reason: that simile. It emphasizes the grotesque appearance of violent death by a comparison with a familiar fact of everyday life: Théstor is gaping like a fish on the hook. The spear-thrust destroys his dignity as a human being even before it takes his life. But the simile does something more: it shows us the action from
the point of view of the killer—the excitement of the hunter dispatching his prey, the joy of the fisherman hauling in his catch. The lines combine two contrary emotions: man's instinctive revulsion from bloodshed and his susceptibility to the excitements of violence. And they are typical of the poem as a whole. Everywhere in Homer's saga of the rage of Achilles and the battles before Troy we are made conscious at one and the same time of war's ugly brutality and what Yeats called its "terrible beauty." The Iliad accepts violence as a permanent factor in human life and accepts it without sentimentality, for it is just as sentimental to pretend that war does not have its monstrous ugliness as it is to deny that it has its own strange and fatal beauty, a power, which can call out in men resources of endurance, courage and self-sacrifice that peacetime, to our sorrow and loss, can rarely command. Three thousand years have not changed the human condition in this respect; we are still lovers and victims of the will to violence, and so long as we are, Homer will be read as its truest interpreter.

This was recognized by Simone Weil in an essay written long before she left her native France for wartime London, where she filled her brilliant notebooks with reflections on Greek literature and philosophy in the short time left to her to live. This classic (and prophetic) statement—L'Iliade ou le Poème de la Force—presented her vision of Homer's poem as an image of the modern world.

The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad, is force. Force as man's instrument, force as man's master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force: swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected. Those who had dreamed that force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past, have seen the poem as a historic document; those who can see that force, today as in the past, is at the center of all human history, find in the Iliad its most beautiful, its purest mirror.

She goes on to define what she means by force: "force is what makes the person subjected to it into a thing." She wrote these words in 1939: the article was scheduled for publication in the Nouvelle Revue Française, but before it could be printed Paris was in the hands of the Nazis and her compatriots, like all Europe, were subjected to force and turned into things—corpses or slaves.
“Its most beautiful, its purest mirror . . .” The most marvelous lines in the Iliad owe their unearthly, poignant beauty to the presence of violence, held momentarily in reserve but brooding over the landscape. They are the lines that end Book 8 and describe the Trojans camped on the plain, awaiting the next dawn, which will launch them on their attack on the Greek fortification.

And so their spirits soared
as they took positions down the passageways of battle
all night long, and the watchfires blazed among them.
Hundreds strong, as stars in the night sky glittering
round the moon’s brilliance blaze in all their glory
when the air falls to a sudden, windless calm . . .
all the lookout peaks stand out and the jutting cliffs
and the steep ravines and down from the high heavens bursts
the boundless bright air and all the stars shine clear
and the shepherd’s heart exults—so many fires burned
between the ships and the Xanthus’ whirling rapids
set by the men of Troy, bright against their walls.

These are surely the clearest hills, the most brilliant stars and the brightest fires in all poetry, and everyone who has waited to go into battle knows how true the lines are, how clear and memorable and lovely is every detail of the landscape the soldier fears he may be seeing for the last time.

THE TROJANS

The city, the polis, as the Greeks called it, was for them the matrix of civilization, the only form of ordered social life they could understand; it is the exclusive form assumed by ancient Greek culture from its beginning to its end. The city was small enough so that the citizens knew one another, participated in a communal life, shared the common joy of festivals, the sorrow of public bereavement, the keen excitement of competition, the common heritage of ancestral tombs and age-old sanctified places. The destruction of a city is a calamity all the more deeply felt because of the close cohesion of its inhabitants and their attachment, reinforced over generations from a mythical past, to its landmarks and buildings.

The first city we hear of in Greek literature is Troy. It is characteristic of the Iliad’s tragic viewpoint that this city, the literary prototype of all
Greek cities, is to be destroyed. The poem ends before Troy falls, but we are left in no doubt about its fate. One of the deep sources of the tragic force of the *Iliad* is that the city of Troy is doomed, doomed to go down in fire and slaughter under the assault of the Achaeans, whose cities are far away and half-forgotten in the long siege, whose home for ten years has been the raw world of tent shelters and beached ships.

Homer's Troy has been assigned a few traits that sound Oriental (or at any rate non-Greek)—Priam's fifty sons, for example—but it is still recognizably a Greek *polis*. It is a site chosen with an eye to defensive capabilities, with a high eminence that serves as a citadel, a sacred area for the temples and palaces. It is near the junction of two rivers, and it depends on the produce of the surrounding plain, which is rich plowland and grows wheat. It is fortified against attackers: it is well-walled and well-built, it has steep ramparts and gates. These fortifications enclose a vision of civilized life, the splendors of wealth and peace. The city contains, for example, "Priam's palace, that magnificent structure / built wide with porches and colonnades of polished stone" (6.289–90). It is at the gates of this palace that the Trojans hold their assemblies. The city has its hallowed landmarks: the Scaean and Dardanian Gates, the tombs of the royal ancestor Ilus in the plain, of old Aesyetes, and of Myrine; the oak tree by the Scaean Gates (6.283), the fig tree near the tomb of Ilus, and the hot and cold springs . . .

*where the wives of Troy and all their lovely daughters
would wash their glistening robes in the old days,
the days of peace before the sons of Achaea came . . . (22.185–87)*

And in the city are those riches the Achaeans dream of, of which they promise each other shares when the city falls, those riches which, even though the nine years' war has reduced them to a level that Hector regards with dismay (18.334–38), are still enormous. We are given a glimpse of them in Book 6 when Hecuba goes into the royal storeroom to select an offering for Athena, and again in Book 24 when Priam assembles the ransom for Hector's body.

But the wealth of Troy is apparent also from the fact that time after time Trojan warriors, menaced with death as they lose a fight, offer a rich ransom:

"*Take us alive, Atrides, take a ransom worth our lives!
Vast treasures are piled up in Antimachus' house,
bronze and gold and plenty of well-wrought iron—*
father would give you anything, gladly, priceless ransom
if only he learns we’re still alive in Argive ships!’’

(11.153–57)

So the sons of Antimachus to Agamemnon, and in similar terms Adrestus
begs Menelaus for his life and Dolon supplicates Odysseus. In all three
cases the ransom is refused—the war has turned savage in its final phase.
But in time gone by, Trojan ransom money has been a steady source
of wealth for the Achaeans: it is clear from Thersites’ sarcastic questions
addressed to Agamemnon, in Book 2, that this was a regular traffic.
“Still more gold you’re wanting? More ransom a son / of the stallion-
breaking Trojans might just fetch from Troy?” (2.267–68). The repeated
appeals to accept ransom are not only indicative of Troy’s immense
wealth, they are also a reminder of Trojan attitudes: the belief, typical
of rich, civilized cities, that wealth can always buy a solution, and the
illusion that civilized ways of warfare—quarter for disarmed men or
men who surrender, ransom and exchange of prisoners—are laws as
valid and universal as the laws under which their own civilization lives.
Inside Troy the manners of civilized life are preserved; there are restraints
on anger, there is courtesy to opponents, kindness to the weak—things
that have no place in the armed camp on the shore. In the city, those
who have most cause to blame, even to hate. Helen, the old men of
Troy, members of the council, murmur to each other praise for her
beauty as they express their wish that she would go back to the
Achaeans; and old Priam, who has lost sons because of her presence in
Troy and will lose more—Hector above all, and all Troy with him—
Priam too treats her with kindness and generous understanding.

Unfortunately for Troy, the Trojans have the defects of their qualities:
they are not so much at home in the grim business of war as their
opponents. In Book 3 Priam comes to the battlefield to seal the oaths
that fix the terms of the duel between Paris and Menelaus, but he cannot
bear to stay and watch the fight: he fears for his son. And Paris, the
loser in the duel, is rescued by the goddess Aphrodite and returned to
the arms of Helen. He is more at home in his splendid palace than on
the battlefield. But he knows his strengths as well as his limitations; he
answers Helen’s bitter mockery with equanimity, and accepts his brother’s
harsh but just reproaches calmly, with a claim that war is not the
whole of life and that preeminence in other spheres has its importance:

“... don’t fling in my face the lovely gifts
of golden Aphrodite. Not to be tossed aside,
the gifts of the gods, those glories ... 
whatever the gods give of their own free will—”

(3.77–80)
INTRODUCTION

But Troy is not at peace: it is under siege, and by men who mean to raze it from the face of the earth. The arts of peace are useless now. Troy will not be saved by the magnanimity and tender-heartedness of Priam nor by Paris’ brilliance in the courts of love. If it is to survive it will do so because of the devotion, courage and incessant efforts of one man, Priam’s son Hector. On him falls the whole burden of the war. He is a formidable warrior, formidable enough so that in Book 7 no Achaean volunteers to face him in single combat until they are tongue-lashed by Menelaus and then by Nestor. But war is not his native element. Unlike Achilles, he is clearly a man made for peace, for those relationships between man and man, and man and woman, which demand sympathy, persuasion, kindness and, where firmness is necessary, a firmness expressed in forms of law and resting on granted authority. He is a man who appears most himself in his relationships with others. It is significant that our first view of him in action is not in combat but in an attempt to stop it. Announcing Paris’ offer to fight Menelaus and so settle the war, he moves ahead of the Trojan ranks and forces them to a seated position with his spear; meanwhile he is the target of Achaean arrows and stones, until Agamemnon calls a halt. It was a dangerous initiative and one that demanded immense authority, a force of personality recognized by both sides.

But his true quality is seen in his relationship with his fellow countrymen and his family. In Book 6 the seer Helenus sends him back to Troy to organize a sacrifice and procession to Athena. He no sooner appears than the wives and daughters of the Trojans come running, to ask for news of their “brothers, friends and husbands” (6.285): he is their stay and support, the man to whom they turn for comfort. In the palace of Paris, Helen tells him to sit and rest, but he will not: he must visit his own wife and child before he goes back to the fight. He finds Andromache on the wall, with their son. She weeps and begs him to be careful, as wives have begged their husbands all through history.

“Reckless one,
my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!
Have you no pity for him, our helpless son? Or me,
and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow . . .

(6.482–85)

And she begs him to cease fighting in the forefront of the hand-to-hand battle on the plain, to adopt a defensive strategy and command from the walls. Hector’s sad reply reveals his tragic dilemma. His feeling for her prompts him to accept her suggestion but he cannot do it. He is the
leader, the commander, as his name suggests: Hector means “Holder.” He is the one who holds the Trojan defense steady by his example and he must fight in the front ranks. In any case, the standards of martial valor by which he has always lived will not permit it:

“All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman. But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes if I would shrink from battle now, a coward.”

(6.522-25)

But deep in his heart he knows that the effort is futile, that Troy is doomed. He realizes what that will mean for her and hopes that he will not live to hear her cries as she is led off to slavery. He is distracted from this dark vision of the future by the terrified cries of his own baby son, who recoils screaming from the bronze-clad man who moves to embrace him. Forebodings of the future, no matter how well-founded, have to be brushed aside if life is to go on, and Hector now speaks in more hopeful terms as he prays that his son will grow up to be a greater man than his father and then comforts his sorrowing wife. This scene reveals the greatness of Hector as a complete man; we see not only the devotion of the warrior who does his duty and fights for his people, even though he knows that they are doomed, but also his greatness as a husband and father—a striking contrast with the atmosphere of the armed camp on the shore.

It is Hector’s misfortune that Troy is not at peace but at war. He must return to the battle, which now, in accordance with the will of Zeus, turns against the Achaeans. Hector fights courageously, stubbornly, at times exultantly in the near madness of victorious slaughter. But even this berserk fury is still the fighting spirit of the man of the polis, the protector of the community, not the individual rage for glory and booty of a Diomedes or an Achilles. When, at the flood-tide of success, with the Achaeans pinned against their ships, an omen is read by the seer Polydamas as a warning to retreat, Hector will have none of it, will not put his trust in birds and the interpreters of their movements. “Fight for your country—’ he says, “that is the best, the only omen!” (12.281). It is one of the most famous lines in the poem, respected and admired by the Greeks of later centuries as the epitome of patriotic courage, of the mood that inspired men to defend their own city, great or small, in the face of overwhelming odds, hostile portents and omens of disaster. It is for his country that he is fighting, and he fights well enough so that
the will of Zeus is fulfilled: the Achaeans are penned up in their fortifications, the first Achaean ship is fired. Hector is lord of the battlefield; indeed, from what we have seen of champions in combat in the poem so far, he can claim to be the best man, Greek or Trojan. But that is because we have not yet seen Achilles in battle. And when we do, and Homer recreates for us the irresistible violence of the man born and shaped for battle, who values life, his own included, as nothing, the killer in his own domain—lion in the bush, shark in the water—we realize that Hector’s defeat and death are inevitable.

The Iliad is a poem that lives and moves and has its being in war, in that world of organized violence in which a man justifies his existence most clearly by killing others. This violence is Achilles’ native element: only in violence are his full powers exerted, his talents fully employed. And he has deliberately chosen this sphere of activity, in which he is invincible, though he knows it will end in his early death.

"Mother tells me,
the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
that two fates bear me on to the day of death.  
If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
my pride, my glory dies . . .
true, but the life that’s left me will be long . . ."

(9.497-504)

And he has chosen glory and death at Troy. The natural consequence of that choice is a fierce devotion to the glory which he has preferred to a long life; any diminution of that glory, any hint that he is not the center of the world of violence, is an intolerable insult. And Agamemnon, in the quarrel that opens the poem, strikes at the roots of his pride, at that self-esteem which he prizes above life itself.

"You are nothing to me—you and your overweening anger!
. . . I will be there in person at your tents
to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize—
so you can learn just how much greater I am than you . . ."

(1.213-19)

This is an unforgivable insult; it denies Achilles any claim to honor at all, it treats him as a man of no worth, in fact as a subject, an inferior.
Achilles starts to draw his sword. For him there can be only one answer to such words: “so you can learn just how much greater I am than you” amounts to a denial of his right to exist. For the honor of Achilles is more important than that of other men; he has already chosen an early death for honor’s sake. His intention was to “thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now” (1.225), and he would have done so if Athena had not intervened. Instead he withdraws to his tents and, through his mother Thetis and her supplication of Zeus, brings about the Trojan resurgence, which will send so many valiant souls of heroes down to Hades. For more than three quarters of the poem Achilles takes no part in the fighting: when at last, with Patroclus dead and the fight raging over his corpse, Achilles is ready to fight, he has no armor—he cannot even help rescue the body of his friend. He goes to the edge of the ditch to show himself to the Trojans and shout an announcement that he will return to the battle. And later, in the new panoply made by Hephaestus and brought by Thetis, he advances for the first time in the poem against the Trojan ranks. We have seen many men fight in the Iliad so far, but not Achilles. We have heard of his fighting in the past, from himself and others, but now Homer must show it to us, give us a picture of the supreme violence, goaded to fury and at the highest pitch of its relentless skill and strength. He does not fail us. The violence of Books 20 and 21 makes what has gone before seem child’s play.

Death is the lot of the Trojans who stand in the way of Achilles as he seeks out Hector, the new object of his rage. One after another he cuts them down and the death blows are hideously, unnecessarily strong. Others he drives into the river Xanthus and plunges in after them, killing in the water. Later he meets one who escaped from the river and, weary and sweating, has thrown his weapons on the ground. It is one of Priam’s sons, Lycaon, who had been Achilles’ prisoner once, had been ransomed and returned to Troy, only to meet his death now. As Achilles raises his spear, Lycaon runs under it, clasps Achilles’ knees and pleads for life. But Achilles will take no prisoners now. Once he did, but now, for the Trojans who killed his friend Patroclus, there is no pity in his heart, none, above all, for the sons of Priam, the brothers of Hector. In a famous and terrifying passage, he formulates the creed of the warrior devoted to death:

“Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you.
And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am?
The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life
a deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you, death and the strong force of fate are waiting. There will come a dawn or sunset or high noon when a man will take my life in battle too—flinging a spear perhaps or whipping a deadly arrow off his bow."

"Friend, you too must die..." That macabre word "friend" is sincerely meant; it is a recognition of equality, the equality of men of war, all of whom must face violent death. And Lycaon recognizes his death sentence. He lets go of Achilles' spear and sinks "back down... / spreading both arms wide" (21.130–31) in a resigned gesture of relaxation to take the blow of Achilles' sword. And Achilles turns back to the slaughter. "Die, Trojans die— / till I butcher all the way to sacred Troy" (21.146–47). And die they do, all those who cannot get back inside the walls, through the gate where Hector takes his stand to meet, at last, his mighty opposite.

The whole poem has been moving toward this duel between the two champions, but there has never been any doubt about the outcome. The husband and father, the beloved protector of his people, the man who stands for the civilized values of the rich city, its social and religious institutions, will go down to defeat at the hands of this man who has no family, who in a private quarrel has caused the death of many of his own fellow soldiers, who now in a private quarrel thinks only of revenge, though that revenge, as he well knows, is the immediate prelude to his own death. And the death of Hector seals the fate of Troy; it will fall to the Achaeans, to become the pattern for all time of the death of a city. The images of that night assault—the blazing palaces, the blood running in the streets, old Priam butchered at the altar, Cassandra raped in the temple, Hector's baby son thrown from the battlements, his wife Andromache dragged off to slavery—all this, foreshadowed in the Iliad, will be stamped indelibly on the consciousness of the Greeks throughout their history, immortalized in lyric poetry, in tragedy, on temple pediments and painted vases, to reinforce the stern lesson of Homer's presentation of the war: that no civilization, no matter how rich, no matter how refined, can long survive once it loses the power to meet force with equal or superior force.

But Homer's view of the war is more somber still. From the point of view of the powers that rule his universe, the gods, all the human struggles, the death of heroes, the fall of cities, are only of passing interest, to be forgotten as they are replaced by similar events played
out by different actors. Troy will fall now, but so someday will the cities
of its conquerors. And the great wars that brought glory and death to
the heroes will not even be allowed to leave a mark on the landscape.
When Hector was threatening the Greek ships, the Achaeans built a
great protective wall around them, with a ditch in front. After the fighting
was over Apollo and Poseidon destroyed the wall . . .

flinging into it all the rivers' fury.
All that flow from the crests of Ida down to breaking surf . . .
The channels of all those rivers—Apollo swung them round
into one mouth and nine days hurled their flood against the wall
and Zeus came raining down, cloudburst powering cloudburst,
the faster to wash that rampart out to open sea.
The Earth-shaker himself, trident locked in his grip,
led the way, rocking loose, sweeping up in his breakers
all the bastions' strong supports of logs and stones . . .
He made all smooth along the rip of the Hellespont
and piled the endless beaches deep in sand again
and once he had leveled the Argives' mighty wall
he turned the rivers flowing back in their beds again
where their fresh clear tides had run since time began.

So in the years to come Poseidon and god Apollo
would set all things to rights once more. (12.21–42)

Man's highest efforts, his struggles on the face of the earth are, from
the heavenly point of view, insignificant, his huge military constructions
merely a surface disturbance to be readjusted. As even now, on the
beaches of the 1944 Normandy landing—Sword, Juno, Gold, and Utah
and Omaha, where once the great artificial harbors, the Mulberries,
floated, loaded with vehicles and munitions—now the waves and the
sand show hardly a trace of the gigantic enterprise . . . at most an
occasional rusted grenade pin or the worn rubber heel of a GI boot. As
at Troy, things have been set to rights.

THE GODS

The subject of the poem is the rage of Achilles against Agamemnon,
a human passion, but the prologue speaks also of gods. "What god
drove them to fight with such a fury? / Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto" (1.9–10). A few lines earlier we have been told that as heroes fell in
battle, "the will of Zeus was moving toward its end" (1.6). Are the events of the poem the creation of the will of Zeus and Apollo, or of the will of Achilles? To what extent is Achilles a free and responsible agent? It is a question raised by many other passages in the poem, as gods inspire, restrain, terrify or rescue individual heroes. How far can men whose actions so often seem to be the product of direct divine intervention be held responsible? Is there, in fact, in Homer any fully formed concept of free and responsible human action? It would seem at first as if the answer were No. In the quarrel in Book 1 Achilles refrains from killing Agamemnon on the spot because Athena grasps him by the hair and forbids it. But a closer look at this and similar passages where human action is prompted by divine suggestion reveals that the Homeric conception of divine interference is an extremely subtle one. Athena seizes Achilles by the hair just as he draws his sword, but we have been told that before he drew it, he had considered the alternative.

She comes, as it were, as the representation of that more cautious course he had considered, to urge its claims. And it is remarkable that she uses language not of command but of persuasion. "Down from the skies I come to check your rage / if only you will yield" (1.242–43). The Greek word here translated "yield"—πιθήαι—is actually a form of the verb πείθω, "to persuade." There is a correlation here between divine intervention and independent human action: they seem to work together, or rather they seem to be the same thing viewed from two different angles. And there are of course passages in the Ἰλιάδ where a man comes to a decision, choosing between alternatives, with no divine suggestion or intervention at all. We see Odysseus in the thick of battle, his flanks threatened, debate with himself whether to run for it or fight on: he comes to the conclusion that he must stay and fight. His impulse to run is countered by his fear of being thought a coward; the warrior code asserts its authority even in the face of almost certain death (11.477–86). But this is still a free decision, as Homer makes clear when later he puts Menelaus in the same situation, gives him many of the same
formulas of debate, for and against retreat, and has him come to the opposite conclusion—he withdraws from the battle (17.101–21). Usually, however, important human decisions involve the participation of a god; divine intervention and human responsibility coexist.

This is not the only pair of philosophical irreconcilables that Homer rides in tandem: he presents us also with Destiny and its voice Prophecy on the one hand, together with the will of Achilles and Zeus on the other. Events are determined, we are expressly told at the beginning of the poem and elsewhere, by the will of Zeus, who is presented to us in the poem as a figure more stable, more majestic, than the other gods. And yet on more than one occasion the will of Zeus is thwarted by fate, as in the case of Sarpedon, his beloved son. As he sees him closing in combat with Patroclus, Zeus laments: “Sarpedon, the man I love the most, my own son—/doomed to die at the hands of Menoetius’ son Patroclus” (16.515–16).

Many attempts have been made to reconcile these two ideas, to assert the overriding power of Zeus’s will on the one hand, or that of a nameless destiny on the other, but in fact the coexistence of these irreconcilables is not a phenomenon confined to Homer’s imagined world. In any civilization which makes a place in its thought for free will (and therefore individual responsibility) and pattern (and therefore overall meaning), the two concepts—fixed and free—exist uneasily cheek by jowl. The only escape from this logical contradiction is the prison of rigid determinism, a pattern fixed from the beginning and not subject to change, or on the other hand, the complete freedom and meaningless anarchy of an unpredictable universe. And Greek thought, like ours (or those of us at least who still live in the humane traditions of the West), tries to embrace the logical contradiction of freedom and order combined.

In Homer the combination is a subtle one; the idea of destiny, of what is fixed, is flexible. Zeus can predict the future—the deaths of Patroclus, of Achilles, the fall of Troy—and in all these cases it is impossible to say whether the result is destiny or his will or both. But sometimes the possibility is raised that what is fated will actually be annulled by divine will—or even by human. So when Achilles in his rage storms against the routed Trojans and comes right up to the walls, Zeus stirs the gods to go into battle to delay the swift advance of Achilles. “Now,” he says, “with his rage inflamed for his friend’s death, / I fear he’ll raze the walls against the will of fate” (20.35–36).

“Against the will of fate...” These lines so upset some ancient editors, men schooled in philosophy and especially the Stoic and Epicurean quarrels about fate and freedom that, in the interests of logical
consistency, they tried to suppress the offending lines and substitute the following passage: "But it is not fated that the well-built city of Troy should be sacked in Achilles' lifetime. It will be taken by the wooden horse. . . ."

It is thought possible, then, in Homer's vision, that Achilles can somehow break the pattern; in fact he must be prevented. And Zeus can break it too. He laments the fate of Sarpedon—and is tempted to save him. But his consort Hera recalls him to a sense of duty.

"Do as you please, Zeus . . .
but none of the deathless gods will ever praise you.
And I tell you this—take it to heart, I urge you—
if you send Sarpedon home, living still, beware!
Then surely some other god will want to sweep
his own son clear of the heavy fighting too.
Look down. Many who battle round King Priam's
mighty walls are sons of the deathless gods—
you will inspire lethal anger in them all."

(16.526-34)

And her argument prevails. Destiny could, theoretically, be defied, but only at the risk of chaos. Zeus lets Sarpedon go down to death.

The Olympian gods are a family like many a family on earth. It has an all-powerful, philandering father, who cannot be defied but may be deceived, a watchful, jealous and intriguing wife, and sons and daughters who vie for their parents' favor as they pursue their individual aims. These gods play their part in the poem, in close contact with the human beings. And gods and men, for Homer, are very much alike—in shape, in speech, even in motive, in passion, in forms of action. The most passionate of the gods involved in the struggle are Hera, the wife of Zeus, and Athena, his daughter; they hate Troy and the Trojans with a bitter, merciless hatred. We are not told why they nurse this savage hatred for the Trojans until Book 24, where the famous Judgment of Paris is mentioned (24.31–36 and note ad loc). It is typical of a certain school of thought about Homer that these lines, the only explicit mention of the Judgment of Paris in the Iliad, have been suspected as a later addition; the beauty contest of the goddesses is too frivolous a motif for the high tragedy of the poem. But this leaves the unsuccessful goddesses' raw hatred for Troy unexplained. It seems clear from the casual, almost cryptic, way Homer refers to the story that it was perfectly familiar to his audience, and Hera's motive for hating Troy, the insult to her beauty, is perfectly consonant with the picture of Hera as the jealous divine wife.
Homer presents elsewhere in the *Iliad*—in her plot against Heracles, Zeus’s child by a mortal woman (14.300–8), and her brutal assault on Artemis, Zeus’s child by another goddess (21.557–66). Hell hath no fury like a goddess scorned. And this personal motive has its opposite side: the unfailing support given to the Trojans by the winner of the beauty contest, Aphrodite, and her intervention to save Paris from his fate at the hands of Menelaus (3.439–41).

The reasons for divine intervention are trivial, human, all too human. Yet these gods, imagined in the likeness of man in all his strength and weakness, but magnified in scale, are figures symbolic of those aspects of our lives that seem incomprehensible and uncontrollable. Athena prompts the archer Pandarus to shoot Menelaus (not that he did not want to) and so destroys what for a moment seemed a chance to end the war (4.99–159). Both sides, now Achilles is absent, want peace, but the war goes on. We too have seen and may see again similar situations, and when the catastrophe comes on us in spite of the universal desire to avoid it, we fall back on explanations that are perhaps more sophisticated but no more satisfactory: the irrationality of human nature, the will of history (Croce’s phrase), the will of God or even pure accident—and in the last analysis these explanations are just as metaphysical as Homer’s gods.

The gods intervene also in a more direct fashion: they sometimes take part in the fighting. They do so to protect human favorites or, on a grander scale, to instill courage and combat-fury into individual heroes and even whole armies, as Poseidon does (14.422–610) in defiance of Zeus’s nonintervention order. This is not a modern way of looking at battle, but it is a striking way of expressing one of the mysteries of combat—the unpredictable currents of aggressive courage or faltering panic which sweep through armies, the mysterious factor known as morale. It is not a factor that can be fed into the computer (though that expert on the subject, Napoleon, said it was three times as important as matériel), and everyone who has been in battle knows how intangible and unpredictable it is, how hard-pressed, outgunned men can suddenly take the offensive and turn the tables, how victorious advancing units can develop an uneasiness about their flanks that can turn into panic. And in fact battle is always unpredictable. In the early years of the fifteenth century, as the English armies, masters of southern and central France in a hundred years’ war, found themselves besieged and threatened by French troops they had beaten scores of times, who were now led by a peasant girl from Domrémy, men fell back on explanations no less unworldly than Homer’s gods. Joan herself claimed that the
Archangel Michael had appeared and told her to kick the English out of France, "bouter les Anglais hors de la France," and the English firmly believed that she was sent not by an angel but by the Devil, and burned her as a witch at Rouen. And historians still find it impossible to explain, in purely rational terms, how she could have accomplished what she did.

Sometimes, however, the Homeric gods do more than protect and encourage; they actually join in the fighting, usually against one another, though in Book 5 Ares kills a Greek warrior and is in his turn wounded by Diomedes, who has already wounded Aphrodite. When Zeus encourages them to join in the fighting, as Achilles comes out to attack the Trojans, gods fight against gods: Athena against Ares and Aphrodite, Hephaestus against the river-god Xanthus, Hera against Artemis. The only one of these contests that is treated with epic dignity is that between Hephaestus and Xanthus, fire against water, against the immense strength of the river that came close to drowning Achilles. But when Athena downs Ares with a stone and then punches Aphrodite in, of all places, the breasts, when Hera smiles as she boxes the ears of Artemis with her bow, no reaction other than laughter seems possible. These wounds heal quickly, and even if they did not, the gods are exempt from the ultimate consequence of action: they cannot lose their lives—no matter what they do; they will survive. And given this crucial difference between gods and men, only men can have true dignity on the battlefield; the presence of gods there is an impertinence. The immunity of the gods, who fight their mock battles while men stand and die, casts into higher relief the tragic situation of the men who risk and suffer not only pain and mutilation but the prospect, inevitable if the war goes on long enough, of death, of the total extinction of the individual personality.

The gods are immortal; they are not subject to time. They have all the time in the world. And so they are not subject to change, to the change brought by age, to the change brought by learning from suffering and a realization of limitations. They will always be what they are now and have always been; they are all the same at the end of the Iliad as at the beginning. They do not change, do not learn. How could they? They are the personification of those mysterious forces which through their often violent interaction produce the harsh patterns of human life—the rise and fall of nations, the destructiveness of the earthquake, the terror of the flood, the horrors of the plague, but also the sweetness of passionate love, the intoxication of wine, the extra strength that surges through a warrior's limbs at the moment of danger.
As personalities (and that is how Homer and the Greeks always saw them), they are very different from one another, but they have, besides immortality, one other thing in common—a furious self-absorption. Each one is a separate force which, never questioning or examining the nature of its own existence, moves blindly, ferociously, to the affirmation of its will in action. The Homeric god recognizes no authority outside itself—except superior force. How are arguments settled in heaven? Like this: “Obey my orders,” says Zeus to Hera.

“for fear the gods, however many Olympus holds,
are powerless to protect you when I come
to throttle you with my irresistible hands.”

(1.681-83)

The other gods do not argue with Zeus, though they may try to trick him, as Hera does successfully (14.187-421), and he does not explain his will to them, he threatens and enforces. There are no moral questions involved, only the clash of wills, intent on manifesting their existence—whether by bringing Troy to destruction or by driving Helen back into bed with Paris, as in the strange scene where Aphrodite, in the shape of an old woman, acts the procuress. “Quickly—Paris is calling for you, come back home! / There he is in the bedroom, the bed with inlaid rings . . . ” (3.450-51). Helen recognizes the goddess and resists her temptation: “Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now? / Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?” (3.460–61). “Lusting” is not too strong a word; the mating of male and female is Aphrodite’s very existence; that is why she is so stubborn to procure it. And she flares up in anger:

“Don’t provoke me—wretched, headstrong girl!
Or in my immortal rage I may just toss you over,
hate you as I adore you now—with a vengeance . . . ”

So she threatened
and Helen the daughter of mighty Zeus was terrified.

(3.480-86)

And well she might be. Helen has nothing but her beauty and the charm it casts on all men; without Aphrodite she would be nothing. And Aphrodite plays the same role on Olympus as on earth. She gives Hera, who wants to divert Zeus’s attention from the battle so Poseidon can help the Achaeans,
the breastband,
pierced and alluring, with every kind of enchantment
woven through it... There is the heat of Love,
the pulsing rush of Longing, the lover's whisper,
irresistible—madness to make the sanest man go mad.

Zeus in his sphere of power, Aphrodite in hers, are irresistible. To be a god is to be totally absorbed in the exercise of one's own power, the fulfillment of one's own nature, unchecked by any thought of others except as obstacles to be overcome; it is to be incapable of self-questioning or self-criticism. But there are human beings who are like this. Preeminent in their particular sphere of power, they impose their will on others with the confidence, the unquestioning certainty of their own right and worth that is characteristic of gods. Such people the Greeks called "heroes"; they recognized the fact that they transcended the norms of humanity by according them worship at their tombs after death. Heroes might be, usually were, violent, antisocial, destructive, but they offered an assurance that in some chosen vessels humanity is capable of superhuman greatness, that there are some human beings who can deny the imperatives which others obey in order to live.

The heroes are godlike in their passionate self-esteem. But they are not gods, not immortal. They are subject, like the rest of us, to failure, above all to the irremediable failure of death. And sooner or later, in suffering, in disaster, they come to realize their limits, accept mortality and establish (or reestablish) a human relationship with their fellowmen. This pattern, recurrent in the myths of the Greeks and later to be the model for some of the greatest Athenian tragedies, is first given artistic form in the Iliad.

ACHILLES

There are in the poem two human beings who are godlike, Achilles and Helen. One of them, Helen, the cause of the war, is so preeminent in her sphere, so far beyond competition in her beauty, her power to enchant men, that she is a sort of human Aphrodite. In her own element she is irresistible. Every king in Greece was ready to fight for her hand in marriage, but she chose Menelaus, king of Sparta. When Paris, the prince of Troy, came to visit, she ran off with him, leaving husband and daughter, without a thought of the consequences for others. Her willful action is the cause of all the deaths at Troy, those past and those to come. When she left with Paris she acted like a god, with no thought
of anything but the fulfillment of her own desire, the exercise of her own nature. But when the *Iliad* opens she has already come to realize the meaning for others of her actions, to recognize that she is a human being. She criticizes herself harshly as she speaks to Priam:

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"if only death had pleased me then, grim death,
that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking
my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child . . . "
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(3.209–11)

She feels responsible for the human misery she sees all around her, something the gods never do. When Zeus and Hera settle their quarrel about the fate of Troy (4.28–79), Zeus gives way but claims her acquiescence whenever he in his turn may wish to destroy a city. Not only does she accept, she actually offers him three cities, those she loves best: Argos, Sparta and Mycenae. That is how the fate of nations is decided. Human suffering counts for nothing in the settlement of divine differences. The gods feel no responsibility for the human victims of their private wars. But Helen has come at last to a full realization of the suffering she has caused; too late to undo it, but at least she can see herself in the context of humankind and shudder at her own responsibility. "My dear brother," she says to Hector.

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"dear to me, bitch that I am, vicious, scheming—
horror to freeze the heart! Oh how I wish
that first day my mother brought me into the light
some black whirlwind had rushed me out to the mountains
or into the surf where the roaring breakers crash and drag
and the waves had swept me off before all this had happened!"
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(6.408–13)

This acceptance of responsibility accounts for her resistance when the goddess Aphrodite urged her to go to bed with Paris; in that scene she fell below the level of divine indifference—as from the human point of view she rose above it. She has ceased to be a mere existence, an unchanging blind self. She has become human and can feel the sorrow, the regret, that no human being escapes.

At the beginning of the *Iliad* Helen has already broken out of the prison of self-absorption, but this is the point at which Achilles enters it. The *Iliad* shows us the origin, course and consequences of his rage, his imprisonment in a godlike, lonely, heroic fury from which all the rest of the world is excluded, and also his return to human stature. The
road to this final release is long and grim, strewn with the corpses of many a Greek and Trojan, and it leads finally to his own death.

There are, of course, objections that may be made to such a view of Achilles as a tragic hero, a fully created character whose motives and action form an intelligible unity. Prominent among them are the contradictions and inconsistencies in Achilles' reactions to events that many critics claim to detect in the text of the poem. These are telltale signs, according to one school, of oral improvisation under the pressure of performance; the result, according to another, of later editorial activity. It may be, however, that the critics have underestimated the elegance and sophistication of Homer's narrative technique (a constant danger for those who insist in thinking of him purely in terms of oral composition). In his creation of character Homer spares us the rich, sometimes superfluous, detail we have come to associate with that word in modern fiction; he gives us only what is necessary to his purpose. Similarly, in his presentation of motivation, he is economical in the extreme. In those sections of the poem where personal relationships and motives are important—the debate in Book 1, the embassy in Book 9, the meeting of Achilles and Priam in Book 24—Homer's method is dramatic rather than epic. The proportion of direct speech to narrative is such that these scenes, the embassy in particular, could be performed by actors, and as is clear from Plato's dialogue Ion, the later rhapsodes who gave Homeric recitations exploited the dramatic potential of Homer's text to the full. Like a dramatist, Homer shows us character and motivation not by editorial explanation but through speech and action. And he also invokes the response of an audience familiar with heroic poetry and formulaic diction, counting on their capacity to recognize significant omissions, contrasts, variations and juxtapositions. We are not told what is going on in the mind of his characters; we are shown. Homer, like the god Apollo at Delphi in Heraclitus' famous phrase, does not say, nor does he conceal—he indicates.

Achilles plays no part in the events described in Books 2 through 8; he sits by his ships on the shore, waiting for the fulfillment of his mother's promise. And by the end of Book 8, the supplication of Thetis and the will of Zeus have begun to produce results. The Greeks are in retreat, penned up in their hastily fortified camp at nightfall, awaiting the Trojan assault, which will come with daybreak. And Agamemnon yields to Nestor's advice to send an embassy to Achilles, urging him to return to the battle line. He admits that he was wrong and proposes to make amends:
'Mad, blind I was!

Not even I would deny it . . .
But since I was blinded, lost in my own inhuman rage,
now, at last, I am bent on setting things to rights:
I'll give a priceless ransom paid for friendship.''

(9.138-45)

In a bravura passage, he details the priceless ransom. Not only will he return Briseis and swear an oath that he has never touched her, he will give Achilles lavish gifts—gold, horses and women among them. He will also offer him the hand of one of his three daughters, with seven cities as her dowry.

It is a magnificent offer, but there is one thing missing: Agamemnon offers no apology to Achilles, no admission that he was in the wrong. Quite the contrary. His initial confession that he was mad is effectively canceled out by the way he ends:

''Let him submit to me! . . .
Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king,
I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man.''

(9.189-93)

This is a harsh summons to obedience. The word translated ''submit'' is a passive form, dmēthētō, of the verb damadžō, which means ''tame,'' ''subdue.''' It is a word the Homeric poems use of the taming of wild asses, the taming of a bride by a man, of the subjection of a people to a ruler, of a beaten warrior to the victor. Agamemnon will still not recognize Achilles' claim to honor as predominant in battle; in fact these words reveal that the splendid gifts reflect honor on Agamemnon rather than Achilles. They are the enormous bounty a ruler can, if he wishes, bestow on a subject, and will do so only if the subject recognizes his place.

Once the ambassadors arrive, Odysseus describes the plight of the Achaean, begs Achilles to relent and then launches into the recital of the magnificent gifts Agamemnon offers in recompense. The whole of the long recital, rich in detail and rising in intensity throughout, is repeated almost verbatim from Agamemnon's speech; the audience relished a repeat of such a virtuoso passage—this is one of the pleasures of oral poetry in performance. But this is no mere oral poet repeating mechanically, no mere servant of the tradition. We are suddenly reminded that Odysseus' speech is not just a welcome reprise of Agamemnon's brilliant catalogue of gifts—it is a speech of a wily ambassador in a delicate situation. Odysseus cuts short the repetition of Agamem-
non’s speech with the line “All this—I would extend to him if he will end his anger” (9.187–88). And we remember what came next, what Odysseus has suppressed: “Let him submit to me!” (189).

Achilles’ reply is a long, passionate outburst; he pours out all the resentment stored up so long in his heart. He rejects out of hand this embassy and any other that may be sent; he wants to hear no more speeches. Not for Agamemnon nor for the Achaeans either will he fight again. He is going home, with all his men and ships. As for Agamemnon’s gifts,

“'I loathe his gifts . . .
I wouldn’t give you a splinter for that man!
Not if he gave me ten times as much, twenty times over, all he possesses now, and all that could pour in from the world’s end—not all the wealth that’s freighted into Orchomenos, even into Thebes, Egyptian Thebes where the houses overflow with the greatest troves of treasure . . . .
no, not if his gifts outnumbered all the grains of sand and dust in the earth—no, not even then could Agamemnon bring my fighting spirit round until he pays me back, pays full measure for all his heartbreaking outrage’”

(9.462–73)

“Pays full measure for all his heartbreaking outrage”—this is the point. Achilles is a killer, the personification of martial violence, but there is one area in which his sensibilities are more finely tuned than the antennae of a radar scanner—that of honor among men. And he senses the truth. Odysseus did not report Agamemnon’s insulting demand for submission, but Achilles is not deceived. In all Odysseus did say there was no hint that Agamemnon regretted his action, no semblance of an apology, nothing that “pays full measure for all his heartbreaking outrage.” Seen in this context, the gifts are no gifts, they are an insult. Gold, horses, women—he has no need of such bribes. And the offer of Agamemnon’s daughter is that of an overlord to a subject; without an apology, an admission of equal status, it is one more symbol of subordination. His father will find him a bride at home; he will live there in peace, live out his life, choose the other destiny his goddess mother told him he carried toward the day of his death:

“'If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
my pride, my glory dies . . .
true, but the life that’s left me will be long . . . .’”

(9.502–4)
This speech of Achilles is sometimes seen as a repudiation of the heroic ideal, a realization that the life and death dedicated to glory is a game not worth the candle.

"Cattle and fat sheep can all be had for the raiding,
tripods all for the trading, and tawny-headed stallions.
But a man's life breath cannot come back again—
no raiders in force, no trading brings it back,
once it slips through a man's clenched teeth."  
(9.493–97)

These are indeed strange words for Achilles, but in the context of the speech as a whole they are not inconsistent with his devotion to honor. It is the loss of that honor, of recognition as the supreme arbiter of the war, which has driven him to these formulations and reflections. He would still be ready to choose the other destiny, a short life with glory, if that glory had not been taken away from him by Agamemnon, and were not even now, in the absence of an apology, withheld.

In the face of this passionate rejection there is nothing Odysseus can say. It is Phoenix, Achilles' tutor and guardian from the days of his boyhood, who now takes up the burden. In the name of that relationship he asks Achilles to relent. Even the gods, he says, can be moved, by prayer and supplication. He goes on to describe the spirits of Prayer, "daughters of mighty Zeus." Litai is the Greek word, and "prayer" is not an exact translation, for the English word has lost some of its original sense of "supplication"—the root sense of the Greek. These "Prayers for forgiveness" are humble and embarrassed—"they limp and halt,/... can't look you in the eyes" (9.609–12). Their attitude represents the embarrassment of the man who must apologize for his former insolence: it is hard for him to humble himself; it affects even his outward semblance. But he makes the effort, and the Prayers, the entreaties, come to repair the damage done by Aïë, the madness of self-delusion and the ruin it produces—they must not be refused.

But this appeal, too, will fall on deaf ears. And with some justice. Apollo relented in Book 1, but only after full restitution was made and a handsome apology—"Prayers for forgiveness." And where are the prayers, the embarrassed pleas of Agamemnon? The madness of Agamemnon is all too plain, but Achilles has seen no prayers from him—only from Odysseus, and then from Phoenix. Who now tries again, with an example of another hero, Meleager, who relented, but too late: a prophetic paradigm in the framework of the poem. He, too, withdrew
from the fighting in anger, endangered his city, refused entreaties of his fellow citizens and even of his father, refused the gifts they offered him, and finally, when the enemy had set fire to the city, yielded to the entreaties of his wife and returned to the battle. But the gifts he had spurned were not offered again. You in your turn, Phoenix is saying, will someday relent, if Hector drives the Achaeans back on their ships, but if so, you will fight without the gifts that are the visible symbols of honor, the concrete expression of the army’s appreciation of valor. Phoenix is talking Achilles’ language now, and it has its effect: Achilles admits that he finds Phoenix’ appeal disturbing—“Stop confusing / my fixed resolve with this, this weeping and wailing” (9.745–46). And he speaks now not of leaving the next day but of remaining by the ships and ends by announcing that the decision, to stay or to leave, will be taken on the morrow.

Ajax, the last to speak, does not mention Agamemnon but dwells on the army’s respect and affection for Achilles. It is the plea of a great, if simple, man and again Achilles is moved. Though he still feels nothing but hate for Agamemnon, he now decides that he will stay at Troy. But he will not fight until

“... the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector
batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters,
slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire.”

(9.796–98)

Since his ships, as we have been told, are drawn up on the far flank of the beachhead, this is small comfort for Agamemnon; the embassy is a failure.

The battle resumes, and Zeus fulfills his promise to Thetis: Hector and the Trojans drive the Achaeans back on their ships. The main Achaeans fighters—Agamemnon, Diomedes and Odysseus—are wounded and retire from the melee. Achilles, watching all this from his tent, sends Patroclus off to inquire about another wounded man who has been brought back to the ships, Machaon, the physician of the Greek army. And he revels in the setbacks of the Achaeans. “Now,” he says, “I think they will grovel at my knees, / our Achaean comrades begging for their lives” (11.719–20). This passage is of course one of the main-stays of those who wish to attribute Book 9 to a later poet: it seems to them to show ignorance of the embassy to Achilles. But this is because they take it that Agamemnon’s offer of gifts was a fully adequate satisfaction: Grote (the most eloquent champion of this view) even speaks
of “the outpouring of profound humiliation” by the Greeks and from Agamemnon especially. But as we have seen, Odysseus’ speech to Achilles contained not the slightest hint of apology on Agamemnon’s part, and certainly nothing like what Achilles demands—that Agamemnon pay “full measure for all his heartbreaking outrage.” There was no supplication made on behalf of Agamemnon; Phoenix’ mention of the Litai that come humbly and embarrassed to beg favor only underscored the point. Now, says Achilles, now they are beginning to feel the pinch, they will fall at my knees, in the supplicant position of abject prostration, a confession of utter weakness and dependence.

Patroclus comes back from the tents of the Achaeans with news of Machaon’s wound and with a purpose: Nestor has primed him to ask Achilles, if he will not fight himself, to send Patroclus out in his armor. What Achilles now hears from Patroclus is the kind of balm for his wounded pride that he had hardly dared to hope for. Not only is Hector at the ships but:

‘‘There’s powerful Diomedes brought down by an archer, Odysseus wounded, and Agamemnon too, the famous spearman, and Eurypylus took an arrow-shot in the thigh . . . ’’

(16.28–30)

This should be enough to satisfy even Achilles: no more dramatic proof of his superiority in battle could be imagined. And he begins to relent. Though he is still resentful of Agamemnon’s treatment of him, “Let bygones be bygones now. Done is done. / How on earth can a man rage on forever?” (16.69–70). He is willing to save the Achaeans, now that they are suitably punished for the wrong they did him. Why, then, does he not go into battle himself? He tells us:

‘‘Still, by god, I said I would not relax my anger, not till the cries and carnage reached my own ships. So you, you strap my splendid armor on your back, you lead our battle-hungry Myrmidons into action!—’’

(16.71–74)

But Patroclus is not to go too far. He is to drive the Trojans back from the ships, no more: above all, he is not to assault Troy. He is to win glory for Achilles by beating off the Trojan attack, and then “they’ll send her back, my lithe and lovely girl, / and top it off with troves of glittering gifts” (16.99–100). Unlike the Meleager in Phoenix’ cautionary tale, he will receive the gifts once offered and refused, even though he does not join the fighting himself.
All through this speech confused emotions are at war within him. What does he really want? He talks of the restitution of Briseis and gifts, the compensation offered and refused before. He talks of “the beloved day of our return” (16.95). Perhaps he does not know himself at this moment. But at the end of the speech there comes out of him the true expression of the godlike self-absorption in which he is still imprisoned.

“Oh would to god—Father Zeus, Athena and lord Apollo—
not one of all these Trojans could flee his death, not one,
no Argive either, but we could stride from the slaughter
so we could bring Troy’s hallowed crown of towers
toppling down around us—you and I alone!” (16.115–19)

Clearly what he really wishes for is a world containing nothing but himself and his own glory, for Patroclus, whom he now sends out in his own armor, he regards as a part of himself. This solipsistic dream of glory—“everybody dead but us two,” as a scandalized ancient commentator summarized it—so offended the great Alexandrian scholar Zenodotus that he condemned the lines as the work of an interpolator who wished to inject into the *Iliad* the later Greek idea (for which the text gives no warrant) that Achilles and Patroclus were lovers.

All too soon the news comes from the battlefield: Patroclus is dead and the armies are fighting over his corpse. Achilles will return to the battle now, to avenge his friend; he sees the death of Patroclus as the fatal consequence of his quarrel with Agamemnon and wishes that “strife could die from the lives of gods and men” (18.126). He will make peace with Agamemnon. “Enough. / Let bygones be bygones. Done is done” (18.131–32). But this is not regret or self-criticism: he is still angry. “Despite my anguish I will beat it down, / the fury mounting inside me, down by force” (18.133–34). But he is angrier still with Hector. “Now I’ll go and meet that murderer head-on, / that Hector who destroyed the dearest life I know” (18.135–36). His mother has just told him that his death is fated to come soon after Hector’s, and though deeply disturbed by this news, he accepts his fate. Not to avenge Patroclus by killing Hector would be a renunciation of all that he stands for and has lived by, the attainment of glory, of the universal recognition that there is “no man my equal among the bronze-armed Achaeans” (18.124).

He cannot go into battle at once, for he has no armor; his father’s panoply has been stripped from the corpse of Patroclus. Hector wears it now. Thetis goes off to have the god Hephaestus make new armor for her son, and when she brings it he summons an assembly of the
Achaeans, as he had done at the very beginning of the poem. The wounded kings, Odysseus, Diomedes, Agamemnon, their wounds testimony to Achilles' supremacy in combat, come to hear him. His address is short. He regrets the quarrel with Agamemnon and its results. He is still angry—that emerges clearly from his words—but he will curb his anger: he has a greater cause for anger now. He calls for an immediate general attack on the Trojan ranks, which are still marshaled outside the city walls, on the level ground.

Agamemnon's reply to Achilles' short, impatient speech is long and elaborate. It is, in fact, an excuse. Achilles has come as close as he ever could to saying that he was wrong, but Agamemnon, even now, tries to justify himself as he addresses not only Achilles but also the army as a whole, which, as he is fully aware, blames him for the Achaean losses. His opening lines are an extraordinary appeal to the assembly for an orderly reception of his speech: "when a man stands up to speak, it's well to listen. / Not to interrupt him, the only courteous thing" (19.91–92). He disclaims responsibility for his action.

"... I am not to blame!
Zeus and Fate and the Fury stalking through the night,
they are the ones who drove that savage madness in my heart..."

(19.100–2)

He is the victim, he claims, of Até, the madness of self-delusion and the ruin it produces. "I was blinded," he says, "and Zeus stole my wits..." (19.163). He is talking now to a full assembly of the Achaeans, which includes

Even those who'd kept to the beached ships till now,
the helmsmen who handled the heavy steering-oars
and stewards left on board to deal out rations—

(19.48–50)

At the council of the kings, when the embassy to Achilles was decided on, he had spoken more frankly: "Mad, blind I was! / Not even I would deny it" (9.138–39). He does not make so honest an admission of responsibility here. And now he promises to deliver the gifts that were offered and refused, and to restore Briseis and swear a great oath that he has not touched her.

To all this, Achilles is utterly indifferent. He shows no interest in Agamemnon's excuses or in the gifts: clearly he feels that this is all a waste of time. He has only one thing on his mind: Hector. And he urges
immediate resumption of the fighting. He is talking of sending back into combat men who are many of them wounded, all of them tired, hungry, thirsty. Odysseus reminds him of the facts of life. “No fighter can battle all day long, cut-and-thrust / till the sun goes down, if he is starved for food” (19.193-94). Odysseus suggests not only time for the army to rest and feed, but also a public ceremony of reconciliation: the acceptance of Agamemnon’s gifts, the swearing of the oath about Briseis. Agamemnon approves the advice and gives orders to prepare a feast. But Achilles’ reply is brusque and uncompromising. He is not interested in ceremonies of reconciliation which will serve to restore Agamemnon’s prestige: he is not interested in Agamemnon’s excuses, still less in food; he thinks of one thing and one thing only: Hector. He is for battle now, and food at sunset, after the day’s work. The corpse of Patroclus makes it impossible for him to eat or drink before Hector’s death avenges Patroclus and reestablishes Achilles’ identity as the unchallengeable, unconquerable violence of war personified:

“You talk of food?
I have no taste for food—what I really crave
is slaughter and blood and the choking groans of men!” (19.253-55)

Achilles’ outburst is inhuman—godlike, in fact. But the others are men, and Odysseus reminds him what it is to be human.

“. . . We must steel our hearts. Bury our dead,
with tears for the day they die, not one day more.
And all those left alive, after the hateful carnage,
remember food and drink—”

(19.271-74)

Human beings must put limits to their sorrow, their passions; they must recognize the animal need for food and drink. But not Achilles. He will not eat while Hector still lives. And as if to point up the godlike nature of his passionate intensity, Homer has Athena sustain him, without his knowledge, on nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods.

When he does go into battle, the Trojans turn and run for the gates; only Hector remains outside. And the two champions come face-to-face at last. Hector offers a pact to Achilles, the same pact he has made before the formal duel with Ajax in Book 7—the winner to take his opponent’s armor but give his body to his fellow soldiers for burial. The offer is harshly refused. This is no formal duel, and Achilles is no Ajax; he is hardly even human: he is godlike, both greater and lesser than a man.
The contrast between the raw, self-absorbed fury of Achilles and the civilized responsibility and restraint of Hector is maintained to the end. It is of his people, the Trojans, that Hector is thinking as he throws his spear at Achilles: "How much lighter the war would be for Trojans then / if you, their greatest scourge, were dead and gone!" (22.339–40). But it is Hector who dies, and as Achilles exults over his fallen enemy, his words bring home again the fact that he is fighting for himself alone; this is the satisfaction of a personal hatred. The reconciliation with Agamemnon and the Greeks was a mere formality to him, and he is still cut off from humanity, a prisoner of his self-esteem, his obsession with honor—the imposition of his identity on all men and all things.

"Hector—surely you thought when you stripped Patroclus' armor
that you, you would be safe! Never a fear of me,
far from the fighting as I was—you fool!
Left behind there, down by the beaked ships
his great avenger waited, a greater man by far—
that man was I . . . ."

(22.390–95)

He taunts Hector with the fate of his body. "The dogs and birds will maul you, shame your corpse / while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory!" (22.397–98). And in answer to Hector's plea and offer of ransom for his corpse, he reveals the extreme of inhuman hatred and fury he has reached:

"Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now
to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—"

(22.407–9)

This is how the gods hate. His words recall those of Zeus to Hera in Book 4:

"Only if you could breach
their gates and their long walls and devour Priam
and Priam's sons and the Trojan armies raw—
then you just might cure your rage at last."

(4.39–42)

And as Achilles goes on we recognize the tone, the words, the phrases:

"No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom
and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more—no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out your bulk in gold! Not even then . . . "

(22.411–15)

We have heard this before, when he refused the gifts of Agamemnon:

"'Not if he gave me ten times as much, twenty times over, all he possesses now, and all that could pour in from the world's end—no, not if his gifts outnumbered all the grains of sand and dust in the earth—no, not even then . . .'

(9.464–71)

It is the same rage now as then, implacable, unappeasable, like the rage of Hera and Athena—only its object has changed.

Achilles lashes Hector's body to his chariot and, in full view of the Trojans on the walls, drags it to his tent, where he organizes a magnificent funeral for Patroclus. After the burning of the pyre, the hero's memory is celebrated with funeral games—contests, simulated combat, in honor of a fallen warrior. Such was the origin, the Greeks believed, of all the great games—the Olympian, the Pythian, the Isthmian, the Nemean Games, and in Homer himself we hear of funeral games for Amarynceus of Elis and for Oedipus of Thebes. The honor paid to the dead man is marked by the richness of the prizes and the efforts of the contestants. Here the prizes are offered by Achilles, so he himself does not compete. There are to be many contests: a chariot race (which earns the longest and most elaborate description), a boxing match, wrestling, a foot race; after that a fight in full armor, weight throwing and an archery contest. As the events are described we see all the great Achaean heroes, familiar to us from battle-scenes, locked now not in combat but in the fierce effort of peaceful contest. Homer takes our minds away from the grim work of war and the horror of Achilles' degradation of Hector's corpse to show us a series of brilliant characterizations of his heroes in new situations. But the most striking feature of this account of the games is the behavior of Achilles. This seems to be a different man. It is the great Achilles of the later aristocratic tradition, the man of princely courtesy and innate nobility visible in every aspect of his bearing and conduct, the Achilles who was raised by the centaur Chiron. It is a vision of what Achilles might have been in peace, if peace had been a possibility in the heroic world, or, for that matter, in Homer's world. "The man," says Aristotle in the Politics, "who is incapable of working in common, or who in his self-sufficiency has no need of others,
is no part of the community, like a beast, or a god." As far as his fellow Achaeans are concerned, Achilles has broken out of the self-imposed prison of godlike unrelenting fury, reintegrated himself in society, returned to something like human feeling; he is part of the community again.

All through the games he acts with a tact, diplomacy and generosity that seem to signal the end of his desperate isolation, his godlike self-absorption; we almost forget that Hector's corpse is still lying in the dust, tied to his chariot. But if we had forgotten we are soon reminded. Once the games are over, Achilles, weeping whenever he remembers Patroclus—"his gallant heart—/ What rough campaigns they'd fought to an end together" (24.8-9)—drags Hector's corpse three times around Patroclus' tomb. But Apollo wards off corruption from the body, and on Olympus the gods are filled with compassion for Hector: all the gods, that is, except Hera, Athena and Poseidon—a formidable combination.

Apollo (the champion of Troy as the other three are its enemies) speaks up for action to rescue Hector's body. For him, Achilles is the lower extreme of Aristotle's alternatives—a beast:

"—like some lion
going his own barbaric way, giving in to his power,his brute force and wild pride..."

(24.48-50)

Hera, on the other hand, sees him as closer to the other alternative—a god: "Achilles sprang from a goddess—one I reared myself" (24.71). So Zeus makes a decision designed to satisfy both sides: Thetis is to tell Achilles to surrender Hector's body to Priam, but Priam is to come as supplicant to Achilles' tents, bringing a sign of honor, a rich ransom.

When Thetis conveys to Achilles the will of Zeus, his attitude is exactly the same as his reaction to Agamemnon's renewed offer of gifts after the death of Patroclus—cold indifference. He agrees to accept the ransom, but his speech shows no relenting; his heart is still of iron. What is needed to break the walls down, to restore him to full humanity, is the arrival in his tent not of the herald, whom he evidently expected to bring the ransom, but of Priam himself, alone, a supplicant in the night. And that unforeseen confrontation is what Zeus now moves to bring about.

The god Hermes guides Priam safely through the Achaean sentries and through the gate that bars the entrance to Achilles' courtyard; Priam takes Achilles by surprise as he sits at table, his meal just finished. His
appearance, unannounced, is a mystery, a thing unprecedented, and Achilles is astonished. Homer expresses that astonishment by means of a simile, one of the most disconcerting of the whole poem:

\[\text{as when the grip of madness seizes one} \]
\[\text{who murders a man in his own fatherland and flees} \]
\[\text{abroad to foreign shores, to a wealthy, noble host,} \]
\[\text{and a sense of marvel runs through all who see him . . .} \]

\[\text{(24.563–66)} \]

It seems to reverse the situation, as if Priam, not Achilles, were the killer. And yet it is carefully chosen. For Achilles, a child of the quarrelsome, violent society of the Achaeans we know so well from the bitter feuds of the camp, from old Nestor's tales of cattle raids, ambush and border war, from the tales of Achaean suppliants fleeing their homeland with blood on their hands—for Achilles, the appearance of a distinguished stranger and his gesture of supplication evoke the familiar context of the man of violence seeking shelter. Achilles cannot imagine the truth. And now Priam tells him who he is—but not at once. First he invokes the memory of Achilles' father—pining at home for a son he may never see again. And then he reveals his identity and makes his plea. It ends with the tragic and famous lines: “I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before— / I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son” (24.590–91).

And Achilles begins to break out at last from the prison of self-absorbed, godlike passion; “like the gods,” Priam called him, but that is the last time this line-end formula (exclusive to Achilles) appears. He will move now to man's central position between beast and god. But the change is not sudden. The stages in his return to human feelings are presented with masterly psychological insight. Achilles took the old man's hands and pushed him “gently,” says Homer, away, and wept. Not for Priam but for his own aged father, to whose memory Priam had appealed and who will soon, like Priam, lose a son. He raises Priam to his feet and sits him in a chair, and speaks to him in awed admiration: “What daring,” he asks, “brought you down to the ships, all alone . . . ?” (24.606). It was indeed an action calling for the kind of extraordinary courage that is Achilles' own preeminent quality. He comforts the old man, with what small comfort mortals can take for their lot. From his two urns of good and evil, Zeus dispenses now evil, now evil mixed with good. So it was with Peleus. Achilles' own father, who had great honor and possessions. But then:
"only a single son he fathered, doomed at birth,  
cut off in the spring of life—  
and I, I give the man no care as he grows old  
since here I sit in Troy, far from my fatherland,  
a grief to you, a grief to all your children."

(24.630–34)

That last phrase is a new view of the war; he sees it now from Priam’s point of view. And moves on from pity for his own father to pity for the bereaved king of Troy. ‘And you too, old man, we hear you prospered once . . . / But then the gods of heaven brought this agony on you—’ (24.635–40). This is a new way of thinking for Achilles; he sees himself as another man must see him—as he must appear to the father of his enemy, Hector.

He tells Priam to bear up and endure, but the old man, his moment of danger past, his end accomplished, grows impatient and asks for Hector’s body at once. Suddenly we are shown that the newfound emotions have only a precarious existence in Achilles’ heart; at any moment they may be overwhelmed by a return of his anger, his self-centered rage. He knows this himself and warns Priam not to go too fast; he knows how tenuous a hold his new mood has:

"No more, old man, don’t tempt my wrath, not now!  
. . . Don’t stir my raging heart still more.  
Or under my own roof I may not spare your life, old man—  
suppliant that you are . . . "

(24.656–69)

Achilles goes to collect the ransom, and when he orders Hector’s body to be washed and anointed, he gives orders to have it done out of Priam’s sight:

He feared that, overwhelmed by the sight of Hector,  
wild with grief, Priam might let his anger flare  
and Achilles might fly into fresh rage himself;  
cut the old man down . . .

(24.684–87)

He knows himself. This is a new Achilles, who can feel pity for others, see deep into their hearts and into his own. For the first time he shows self-knowledge and acts to prevent the calamity his violent temper might bring about. It is as near to self-criticism as he ever gets, but it marks the point at which he ceases to be godlike Achilles and becomes a human being in the full sense of the word.
He tells Priam Hector's body is ready. And offers him food. It will be Priam's first meal since his son's death. And he speaks to Priam as Odysseus had spoken to Achilles before the battle: there must be a limit to mourning for the dead; men must eat and go on with their lives.

"Now, at last, let us turn our thoughts to supper.
Even Niobe with her lustrous hair remembered food,
though she saw a dozen children killed in her own halls . . .
Nine days they lay in their blood . . .
then on the tenth . . .
. . . Niobe, gaunt, worn to the bone with weeping,
turned her thoughts to food."

(24.707-22)

It is an admission of mortality, of limitations, of the bond that unites him to Priam, and all men.

He has a bed made for Priam outside the tent, for any Achaean coming into the tent and seeing Priam would tell Agamemnon. Achilles assumes the role of the old king's protector; even in his newfound humanity he is still a man alone—his sense of honor will not allow him to let Priam fall into the Achaeans' hands. And he promises to hold off the fighting for the twelve days Priam needs for the funeral of Hector. He has come at last to the level of humanity, and humanity at its best; he has forgotten himself and his wrongs in his sympathy for another man. It is late; only just in time, for when the fighting resumes, he will fall in turn, as his mother told him and as Hector prophesied with his dying breath. The poem ends with the funeral of Hector. But this is the signal for the resumption of the fighting. The first line of the poem gave us the name of Achilles, and its last line reminds us of him, for his death will come soon, as the fighting resumes. The poem ends, as it began, on the eve of battle.

The tragic course of Achilles' rage, his final recognition of human values—this is the guiding theme of the poem, and it is developed against a background of violence and death. But the grim progress of the war is interrupted by scenes which remind us that the brutality of war, though an integral part of human life, is not the whole of it. Except for Achilles, whose worship of violence falters only in the final moment of pity for Priam, the yearning for peace and its creative possibilities is never far below the surface of the warriors' minds. This is most poignantly expressed by the scenes that take place in Troy, especially the farewell scene between Hector and Andromache, but the warriors' dream of peace is projected over and over again in the elaborate similes,
those comparisons with which Homer varies the grim details of the bloodletting, and which achieve the paradoxical effect of making the particulars of destructive violence familiar by drawing for illustration on the peaceful, ordinary activities of everyday life. Dead men and armor are trampled under the wheels of Achilles’ chariot as white barley is crushed under the hoofs of oxen on a threshing floor (20.559–67); hostile forces advancing against each other are like two lines of reapers in the wheat or barley field of a rich man, cutting their way forward (11.76–82); the two fronts in tense deadlock at the Achaean wall hold even like the scales held by a widow, working for a pitiful wage, as she weighs out her wool (12.502–5); the combatants fighting for possession of Sarpedon’s corpse swarm over it like flies over the brimming milk buckets in spring (16.745–47); Menelaus bestrides the body of Patroclus as a lowing cow stands protectively over its first-born calf (17.3–6); Ajax is forced back step by step like a stubborn donkey driven out of a cornfield by boys who beat him with sticks (11.653–62). These vivid pictures of normal life, drawn with consummate skill and inserted in a relentless series of gruesome killings, have a special poignancy; they are one of the features of Homer’s evocation of battle which make it unique: an exquisite balance between the celebration of war’s tragic, heroic values and those creative values of civilized life that war destroys.

These two poles of the human condition, war and peace, with their corresponding aspects of human nature, the destructive and creative, are implicit in every situation and statement of the poem, and they are put before us, in something approaching abstract form, on the shield which the god Hephaestus has made for Achilles. Its emblem is an image of human life as a whole. Here are two cities, one at peace and one at war. In one a marriage is celebrated and a quarrel settled by process of law; the other is besieged by a hostile army and fights for its existence. Scenes of violence—peaceful shepherds slaughtered in an ambush, Death dragging away a corpse by its foot—are balanced by scenes of plowing, harvesting, work in the vineyard and on the pasture, a green on which youths and maidens dance. War has its place on the shield, but it is the lesser one; most of the surface is covered with scenes of peaceful life—the pride of the tilled land, wide and triple-plowed, the laborers reaping with sharp sickles in their hands, a great vineyard heavy with grape clusters, young girls and young men carrying the sweet fruit away in baskets, a large meadow in a lovely valley for the sheep flocks, and, above all, the dance, that formal symbol of the precise and ordered relations of people in peaceful society.
Here young boys and girls, beauties courted
with costly gifts of oxen, danced and danced,
linking their arms, gripping each other's wrists.
And the girls wore robes of linen light and flowing,
the boys wore finest tunics rubbed with a gloss of oil,
the girls were crowned with a bloom of fresh garlands,
the boys swung golden daggers hung on silver belts.
And now they would run in rings on their skilled feet,
nimbly, quick as a crouching potter spins his wheel,
palming it smoothly, giving it practice twirls
to see it run, and now they would run in rows,
in rows crisscrossing rows—rapturous dancing.
A breathless crowd stood round them struck with joy
and through them a pair of tumblers dashed and sprang,
whirling in leaping handsprings, leading out the dance. (18.693–707)

And all around the outermost rim of the shield the god who made
it set the great stream of the Ocean River, the river that is at once the
frontier of the known and imagined worlds and the barrier between the
quick and the dead.

The imbalance of these scenes on the shield of Achilles shows us the
total background of the carnage of the war; it provides a frame which
gives the rage of Achilles and the death of Hector a true perspective.
But it is not enough. The Iliad remains a terrifying poem. Achilles, just
before his death, is redeemed as a human being, but there is no con-
solation for the death of Hector. We are left with a sense of waste, which
is not adequately balanced even by the greatness of the heroic figures
and the action; the scale descends toward loss. The Iliad remains not
only the greatest epic poem in literature but also the most tragic.

Homer's Achilles is clearly the model for the tragic hero of the Sophoclean stage; his stubborn, passionate devotion to an ideal image of
self is the same force that drives Antigone, Oedipus, Ajax and Philoctetes
to the fulfillment of their destinies. Homer's Achilles is also, for archaic
Greek society, the essence of the aristocratic ideal, the paragon of male
beauty, courage and patrician manners—"the splendor running in the
blood," says Pindar, in a passage describing Achilles' education in the
cave of the centaur Chiron. And this, too, strikes a tragic note, for Pindar
sang his praise of aristocratic values in the century which saw them go
down to extinction, replaced by the new spirit of Athenian democracy.
But it seems at first surprising that one of the most famous citizens of
that democracy, a man whose life and thought would seem to place him at the extreme opposite pole from the Homeric hero, who was so far removed from Achilles’ blind instinctive reactions that he could declare the unexamined life unlivable, that Socrates, on trial for his life, should invoke the name of Achilles. Explaining to his judges why he feels no shame or regret for a course of action that has brought him face-to-face with a death sentence, and rejecting all thought of a compromise that might save his life (and which his fellow citizens would have been glad to offer), he cites as his example Achilles, the Achilles who, told by his mother that his own death would come soon after Hector’s, replied: “Then let me die at once—” rather than “sit by the ships . . . / a useless, dead weight on the good green earth” (18.113–23).

And yet, on consideration, it is not so surprising. Like Achilles, he was defying the community, hewing to a solitary line, in loyalty to a private ideal of conduct, of honor. In the last analysis, the bloodstained warrior and the gentle philosopher live and die in the same heroic, and tragic, pattern.
THE SPELLING AND PRONUNCIATION OF HOMERIC NAMES

Though the English spelling of ancient Greek names faces modern poet-translators with some difficult problems, it was not a problem at all for Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Tennyson. Except in the case of names that had through constant use been fully Anglicized—Helen, Priam, Hector, Troy, Trojans—the poets used the Latin equivalents of the Greek names that they found in the texts of Virgil and Ovid, whose poems they read in school. These are the forms we too are familiar with, from our reading of English poets through the centuries: Hecuba, Achilles, Ajax, Achaeans, Patroclus.

Recent poet-translators have tried to get closer to the original Greek and have transliterated the Greek names directly, not through the medium of their Latin adaptations. One translator, for example, presents his readers with Hékabê, Akhilleus, Hektor, Aías, Akhaians and Patróklos. Another shares most of these spellings but, perhaps finding the combination kh unsuited to English, strikes a compromise—Achilleus, Achaians. All translators compromise when it comes to such fully naturalized forms as Helen, Trojans and Argives (Helenê, Trôes and Argeioi in the Greek), and they also retreat from strict transliteration in cases like Rhodes (Rhodos) and Thrace (Thrêikê).

This is an area in which no one can claim perfect consistency: we too offer a compromise. Its basis, however, is a return to the traditional practice of generations of English poets—the use of Latinate spellings except for those names that have become, in their purely English forms, familiar in our mouths as household words.

Rigid adherence to this rule would of course make unacceptable demands: it would impose, for example, Minerva instead of Athena, Ulysses for Odysseus, and Jupiter or Jove for Zeus. We have preferred the Greek names, but transliterated them on Latin principles: Hêrê, for example, is Hera in this translation; Athênê is Athena. Elsewhere we have replaced the letter k with c and substituted the ending us for the Greek os in the names of persons (Patroklos becomes Patroclus). When, however, a personal name ends in ros preceded by a consonant, we have used the Latin ending er: Meleager for Meleagros, Teucer for Teukros.
The Greek diphthongs oi and ai are represented by the Latin diphthongs oe and ae (Boeotia for Boiotia, Achaean for Akhaian) and the Greek diphthong ou by the Latin u (Lycurgus for Lykourgos).

This conventional Latinate spelling of the names has a traditional pronunciation system, one that corresponds with neither the Greek nor the Latin sounds. Perhaps "system" is not the best word for it, since it is full of inconsistencies. But it is the pronunciation English poets have used for centuries, the sounds they heard mentally as they composed and that they confidently expected their readers to hear in their turn. Since there seems to be no similar convention for the English pronunciation of modern transliterated Greek—is the h sounded in Akilleus? is Diomedes pronounced dee-oh-may'-days or dee-oh-mee'-deez?—we have thought it best to work with pronunciation that Keats and Shelley would have recognized.

As in Achilles (a-kil'-eez), ch is pronounced like k throughout. The consonants c and g are hard (as in cake and gun) before a—Lycaon (leye-kay'-on), Agamemnon (a-ga-mem'-non); before o—Corinth (kor'-inth), Gorgon (gor'-gon); before u—Curetes (koo-ree'-teez), Guneus (goon'-yoos); and before other consonants—Patroclus (pa-tro'-klus), Glaucus (glaw'-kus). They are soft (as in cinder and George) before e—Celadon (se'-la-don), Agenor (a-jee'-nor); before i—Cicones (si-koh'-neez), Phrygia (fri'-ja); and before y—Cythera (si-thee'-ra), Gyrtone (jur-toh'-nee). The final combinations cia and gia produce sha—Lycia (li'-sha)—and ja—Phrygia (fri'-ja)—respectively.

There are however cases in which the pronunciation of the consonants does not conform to these rules. One of the names of the Greeks, for example—Argives—is pronounced with a hard g (ar'-geyevz not ar'-jeyevz), by analogy with the town of Argos. And the combination cae is pronounced with a soft c, since the diphthong ae is sounded as ee—Caesar (see'-zar) is a familiar example.

The vowels vary in pronunciation, sometimes but not always according to the length of the Latin (or Greek) syllable, and the reader will have to find guidance in the rhythm of the English line or consult the Pronouncing Glossary at the back of the volume. Final e is always sounded long: Hebe (hee'-bee); final es is pronounced eez, as in Achilles. In other positions, the letter e may represent the sound heard in sneeze or that heard in pet. The letter i may sound as in bit or bite: Achilles (a-kil'-eez) or Atrides (a-treye'-deez). The two sounds are also found for y—Cythera (si-thee'-ra) or Lycaon (leye-kay'-on)—while o is pronounced as in Olympus (o-lim'-pus) or Dodona (doh-doh'-na). In this spelling system, u except in the ending us and in combination with other vowels (see
below) is always long, since it represents the Greek diphthong ou. But it may be pronounced either you as in dew—Bucolion (bew-kol'-i-on)—or oo as in glue—Guneus (goon'-yoos).

The diphthongs oe and ae are both pronounced ee—Achaeans (a-kee'-unz), Phoebus (fee'-bus). The combination aer does not produce a diphthong: Laertes (lay-ur'-teez); in other cases where these letters are sounded separately, a dieresis is used: Danaë (da'-nay-ee). The diphthong au is pronounced aw—Glaucus (glaw'-kus)—but in name endings, Menelaus, for example, it is not a diphthong, and the vowels are pronounced separately (me-ne-lay'-us). Since his name is familiar to the English reader, we have thought it unnecessary to use the dieresis in similar cases. The ending in ous is similar: Pirithous (peye-ri'-tho-us). The ending in eus is sounded like yoos—Odysseus (o- dis'-yoos), except in the case of the name of three rivers—Alpheus (al-fee'-us), Peneus (pee-nee'-us) and Spercheus (spur-kee'-us)—and that of the builder of the Trojan horse, Epeus (e-pee'-us) and the king of Lemnos, Euneus (yoo-nee'-us).

All other vowel combinations are pronounced not as diphthongs but as separate vowels. The sequence ei is pronounced ee'-i: Briseis (breiye-see'-is); double o as oh-o: Deicoon (dee-i'-koh-on). Similarly, oi is treated not as a diphthong but as two separate sounds—Oileus (oh-eel'-yoos), except in the case of Troilus, a name that has been fixed in this Latin spelling since Chaucer and is pronounced troy'-lus.

Obviously we cannot claim complete consistency even within the limits we have imposed on the system. We have occasionally retreated in dismay before some cases where a Latinate form seemed grotesque. Ajax, for example, is a form familiar in English, but there are two men with his name, and when Homer speaks of them in the plural we have used the (Latinized) Greek plural form Aeantes in preference to Ajaxes or the Latin Aiaces. Where no Latin form exists, as in the case of Poseidon, we have used the transliterated Greek, and here again English usage escapes the trammels of our rules, for Poseidon is traditionally pronounced po-seye'-don (not po-see'-i-don), and the same applies to the Pleiades (pleye'-a-deez). But we can claim to have reduced the unsightly dieresis to a minor factor and to have given the reader who comes to Homer for the first time a guide to pronunciation that will stand him or her in good stead when reading other poets who mention Greek names. We have also provided a Pronouncing Glossary of all the proper names in the text, which indicates stress and English vowel length.
HOMERIC GEOGRAPHY:
Mainland Greece

Location uncertain: O A ?
Labels within parentheses indicate modern-day place names.
HOMERIC GEOGRAPHY:
The Peloponnese

Location uncertain: 

Labels within parentheses indicate modern-day place names
HOMERIC GEOGRAPHY: The Aegean and Asia Minor
Location uncertain: o? Labels within parentheses indicate modern-day place names.