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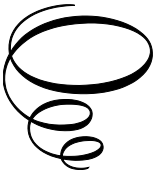
Why Read Homer, Milton, or a Medieval Nun at a Time like This?

Edited by

Marilyn McEntyre and Seth C. Hawkins

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8066-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8066-4

In loving memory of Sherman Hawkins
1929-2019
whose deep, generous delight in literature
gave many readers reason to rejoice

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

MARILYN MCENTYRE

Some years ago, an undergraduate economics major, driven by scheduling constraints to enroll in my upper-division poetry course, appeared in my office bemused. "I don't mean to be impertinent," she began, shuffling her feet in some embarrassment, "but why do people do this?" She meant, of course, why spend long hours of one's life engaged in something as impractical, nonlucrative, and frustratingly ambiguous as reading poetry.

I liked this young woman, and took her question seriously, since it seemed to come not from petulance, but from the kind of honest curiosity that lies at the heart of learning. Her question has stayed with me; I bring it up every time I teach poetry and have raised it about other enterprises whose value might not seem self-explanatory—like reading two-hundred-year-old novels or the musings of Medieval nuns. I tried, on that long-ago afternoon in my office, to avoid the kind of answer my student probably expected–something slightly admonitory and vaguely shaming to the effect that reading improved the mind and widened one's sympathies (both of which, by the way, I believe it does do). Because she was a practical young woman, I tried to offer her a practical answer to her question. It deserves one. More now, perhaps, than when she asked it.

It never went without saying that universal public education would make readers of us all; it no longer goes without saying that everyone who learns to read lives his or her life as a reader, or that those who do read daily venture beyond bestsellers and magazines. "Serious" reading, which I take to mean reading that actively engages the emotions, the intellect, and the moral imagination in the "wrestle with words and meanings," has been relegated largely to classrooms, professional academic societies, book clubs, and people with sufficient motivation to make their way through the long columns of the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *New York Review of Books*. While now and again we spot someone on the subway at rush hour (as I recently did), immersed against all odds in a dog-eared copy of *The Faerie Queene*, we may register a certain surprise when it's not Danielle Steel or Tom Clancy.

Those of us who teach literature wring our hands yearly over the difficult choice of representative texts for courses like "Survey of English Literature" or "History of the Novel" or "Understanding Poetry," wondering what and whom we hope to represent and wondering for how many this will be a first and last exposure to some of the writers we cherish. If this is their one shot at literary experience before moving on forever to absorbing careers in accounting, engineering, or orthopedics, how do we entice them through the looking glass into a world they'll want to revisit? We also wonder, if we want to make sure they read Toni Morrison and Joy Harjo and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, do we have to sideline or eliminate Chaucer or Spenser?

Most of us who teach take far more care these days to make sure no student graduates from college without reading works by people of color, by a wide range of international writers, by people from indigenous cultures, works that challenge and widen the very notion of a literary "canon." At the same time, we have to keep reconsidering—and perhaps reframing—the claims of writers like those we focus on in this collection: should we still be requiring them? In what ways do they address urgent contemporary concerns? As we take a hard, long overdue look at the sordid history of colonialism, institutional racism, enslavement, enforced illiteracy, and white supremacy, how are we to assess the value of white, mostly-European, mostly male, mostly comfortably affluent writers whose profound biases went largely without comment for decades? How are we to weigh the invigorating linguistic unfamiliarities, the historical perspective, and the healthy challenge they offer to contemporary biases against the more immediately relevant and readable texts from the wide, webbed world we now inhabit? And how heavily should we weigh the notion of "elitism"?

Academic criticism, produced in a wide array of journals by scholars under some pressure to publish, has done little in recent years for the many students and adult readers who come to literature feeling fearful, reluctant, or disempowered. The conversation that takes place in those journals and at convention hotels among critics and theoreticians has its own legitimacy, but rarely reaches the larger world of thoughtful adults who read. Even if it did, much of it would seem inaccessible at best, effete and exclusionary at worst. Indeed, professionalization of literary study has tended to turn the "house of fiction" into a fortress. Those of us who, armed with academic credentials and conditioned by a youth spent between book covers, find ourselves inside that fortress may readily enjoy its treasures and comforts, yet even within its walls may no longer roam freely from one enclave to the next without an appropriate passport. Many of us find

ourselves increasingly troubled by the insularity of our ivory (or brick or concrete) tower. Fewer and fewer even seem interested in finding a way in.

The reasons for declining interest in close, thoughtful reading of Western literature from earlier eras are legion. Our concern here is emphatically *not* to argue for reestablishing the literary canon as it was in days of yore—say 1950—but to invite readers to pull some of the older, dustier volumes off the shelf and rediscover them in new terms.

These essays are, we all hope, lively, thoughtful efforts to address my student's question—one that arises in required literature courses all over the country: why would anyone do this? Why, when the world is hovering on the brink of economic, nuclear or climate-related disaster, when environmental degradation and new viruses threaten our health and survival, when racism has finally begun to receive appropriate public scrutiny, would anyone choose to spend time reading *Paradise Lost* or *The Faerie Queene* or the circuitous prose of Henry James? It's a question any morally responsible reader ought to ask. The "why" need not, of course, be addressed in purely utilitarian terms. But surely those of us who devote our lives to reading works widely regarded as obsolete and unnecessary ought to be able to account for our work in the world in a way that is neither defensive nor diffident—in a way that may both satisfy the curiosity of the seeker and meet the challenges of the cynic.

One of the best pieces of advice I received in graduate school came from a professor who handed back a paper in whose rhetorical elegance I had taken some pride (laboriously elaborating John Donne's poetic strategies) with the comment, "It reads well and points out a good many interesting things, but it doesn't pass the 'so what' test." I was stunned. No one in my academic career to date had quite so baldly ventured to suggest that close observation of literary craft was not a self-justifying pursuit. He went on to explain that "so what?" need not necessarily be answered moralistically or even didactically, but that responsible criticism should after all leave us, as Peter Schaffer once put it, "enlarged, enlivened, and enlightened." And we who engage in teaching or criticism ought to be able to say exactly in what way our readings might serve that end.

The question of relevance can be posed from a variety of perspectives. Certainly the general argument can and should still be made that human beings live by story and song—that the desire to produce and enjoy stories and poems and drama is universal, and that if we believe in anything we call the human spirit, these are its nourishment. But that answer to "why" may be too large to satisfy the unconvinced. The urgency of the question often comes out of deep contemporary angst and authentic confusion about how to live morally and socially responsible lives in the

face of global threats. Surely we should not and do not want to waste our time. So, is literature a waste of time? What is it good for? The question is not simply why read Homer, but why read Homer at a time like this?

There is an answer. In fact, there are a variety of answers, some of them surprising. There is much more to those answers than a general admonishment to fix our minds on lofty things. (Chaucer isn't lofty anyway, so we'd have to dismiss him on that count.) Each of the essays in this volume gives its own kind of answer; each is written by a person who has found a particular author of particular value in the business of living here and now. Some of them even more helpful to that enterprise on any given day than *The New York Times*.

Marilyn McEntyre
Carmichael, California

PREFACE:
WHY READ A BOOK LIKE THIS AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

SETH C. HAWKINS, MD

In full transparency, I came to this project not only out of fascination with its topic—the relevance of old authors to a new era—but also because both my parents, Anne and Sherman Hawkins, contributed essays to the endeavor. My entire family aside from me have either earned or are earning doctorates in philosophy; I took another path, into medical practice and applied anthropology. When I learned that these essays existed but had not yet been published, I was as excited to see them as an archaeologist might be in discovering a new site or an archivist might be in discovering a new source. Reading them, editing a bit, I was able to bring a fresh eye to the essays, just as the writers were bringing a fresh eye to old assignments.

As an emergency physician and anthropologist, I looked at the question posed by the unpublished collection from the perspective of an end-user. I could well have been one of the students asking this question of their faculty. If so, my particular focus might be whether there is tangible professional benefit beyond the personal enrichment promised by a liberal arts education. All the authors in this collection are humanities professors and academicians. Granted, who better to ask this question of, but even so, do their answers ring true for the world outside the academy? And beyond the matter of utility, do the works reflected upon here actually have a place in a postmodern era where we actively seek marginalized voices and critically scrutinize historic models of colonialism, religion, gender roles, and other social structures?

With goosebumps traveling up my arms from the power of these essays, I would say the answer to both is yes.

First, the slightly easier question: is there a place for these classics of Western literature in our current world?

The beauty of literature is that it is not a zero-sum enterprise. The commitment to diversity need not silence one voice to provide a platform

for another. Indeed, we might find it more difficult now at an average liberal arts college than a generation ago to study Spenser--certainly to study it from a Christian perspective. But ignoring or abandoning this approach also sidelines a giant part of the richness of European culture, a culture that likely, though its deep flaws deserve the strong criticism they are receiving, also offers gifts that deserve equal attention to those more recently made available from other cultures. These texts are timeworn from the care given them by generations of readers for whom they have been inspirational and transformational. From the perspective of fundamental Quality (using that capitalized term as Robert Pirsig did in his metaphysical fusion of Greek, Native American, and Asian philosophy[1]), the care that these works have engendered and received in itself marks them as Quality works deserving of attention (Pirsig 1974).

Second, the more difficult but probably more important question: what then is the actual place of these works of literature in the "canon," in the curriculum, or in ordinary readers' lives? Do they have a more tangible benefit than simply to serve as representatives of a white, colonial European culture?

It is in elucidating the proper place for these works in the contemporary world that this collection of essays shines.

Speaking from one small niche, as a medical clinician, I would note how many of these seminal texts, and ones like them, have been found to inform and sharpen medical practice, and situate medicine in a broader cultural context. Anne Hawkins writes about how well Homer captures the "pathos of death" and opens a door into that most universal of human experiences. Death and misery—along with other, more positive human experiences, I'm happy to say—are intrinsic to the practice of medicine, nursing, and other healthcare professions. Physician-author Jonathan Shaw in *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, and later in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, uses Homer as an essential launching pad for discussion of some of the most pressing clinical challenges in psychiatry, and society today--the stress injuries and reinsertion challenges of military personnel. And I am fascinated to observe that two of the country's leading medical humanities professors—Dr. Stuart Harris of Harvard University and Dr. Jay Baruch of Brown University, both also practicing emergency physicians—completely independently of each other choose Chekhov (an author who could well have been included in this collection) as the launching point for discussions

[1] Pirsig's work here, still influential in popular in philosophical dialogue, argues for the continued relevance of European (Greek) philosophy among other diverse systems from other parts of the world.

about the very practical work of being a physician. Indeed, with respect to the ubiquity of misery, it is Chekhov's short story *Misery* that they use as a tool for functional training of health professionals. The connection between literature and medicine, both in training and practice, runs deep; Chekhov himself was a physician and famously noted "Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my witness" (Hajar 2004). We can open the gates to a multitude of voices in this intersection of health, society, and medical practice, without necessarily excluding these historic voices who have proven to have such utility and strength.

Other essays in this collection frame and exemplify some of the ways the literature in question can apply to both clinical medicine and applied anthropology. Donald Palmer cites the example of Don Quixote as an example of "choosing madness" as a "technique for living" (citing Freud), which prefaces the seminal and more recent work done by anthropologists such as Sue Estroff (author of *Making It Crazy*) on just this topic.

As an aside (if I may be permitted a Jamesean discursion), in one of the more appealing parts of Palmer's essay, he argues that *Don Quixote* is still fun to read because, frankly, it is still funny. He points to Wile E. Coyote and the Three Stooges as contemporary examples of similar humor, while opening the door to the idea that these themselves might be dated, saying, "If you're as old as I am…" But the popularity of endless on-line videos showing crashes and painful misadventures, or the cultural phenomenon that was the television show *Jackass* (spawning three movies and multiple spin-offs), argue that the seventeenth-century fascination with pain and misadventure is alive and well today. This parallels modern television analogues to Henry James, and what Marilyn McEntyre calls his "thin, unconvincing plots." She points to this as a paradoxical strength, citing James's own aspiration to write a "plotless novel." One need look no further than the television show *Seinfeld* (famously and explicitly a "show about nothing," which became one of the most successful television shows ever and, some would argue, changed television itself irrevocably) to see modern expressions of James's paradoxical strength.

In considering the practical utility of these works, I'm confining myself, as a clinician, to the fields I know, so as not to exceed my own experience and expertise. But I think similar benefits can extend to any number of non-academic fields, including political, military, and business enterprises.

More generally, as an applied anthropologist, these texts in their native form, and their analysis in this collection, form part of our exploration of what it means to be human. The authors in this collection freely expose

the shortcomings and outdated elements of the authors and texts they profile and often lead with those critiques. A dispassionate, participant-observer perspective on European and neo-European culture will note its apparent dysfunctionality, both historical and current. But each of these essays goes on, with inspiring passion, to make the case for why these works deserve to remain as representative of our global experience as humans in a holistic, cross-cultural way. As Sherman Hawkins quotes Milton, "Books are not absolutely dead things, but contain a 'potency of life' as active as the intelligence that gave them birth: a good book is 'the precious life blood of a master spirit.'" The anthropologist in me immediately sees parallels here to other cultures and their expressions of expertise, inspiration, and cultural heritage—what might be shamanistic experience or master-apprentice training elsewhere is, in this particular tradition, the experience of reading and writing books.

Some essayists in this collection appeal to the transcendence and timeless meaningfulness of the authors being studied. Anne Hawkins writes that Homer "continues over time to teach, console, and inspire us." Candace Hull Taylor, writing about Julian of Norwich, says "reading the classics can remind us that politicosocial discourses from periods that pre-date us by several centuries can often remind us that when we find ourselves in a time of great distress and upheaval, we need to remember that others have trod the same path before us *and that reading classical works that concern similar trials and tribulations can make us feel less alone*" (emphasis mine).

Other essayists argue that, in fact, these classical authors actually have merit in specific ways to our specific time. Edmund Reiss, after pointing out the geopolitical similarities of Chaucer's world to ours, maintains that the Wife of Bath is the "first feminist in world literature." Beverly Taylor goes further, refuting timelessness as the most compelling argument for relevance, arguing instead in favor of specific timeliness, and saying the "timeless" poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (such as Sonnet #43) are in fact less relevant than her less well-known, time-anchored poems (such as The Cry of the Children").

> In fact, students' reactions seem to refute claims that great literature is valuable because it transcends its historical moment and addresses perennially compelling topics… Strikingly, the poems my students find most engaging and powerful, also most moving, link directly to nineteenth-century events and political movements. The poem excites students by demonstrating that poetry is not confined in an aesthetic bubble but engages directly with life, albeit in another historical moment.

She also argues that Browning's work can be valued as expressions of women's rights on their own as works of contemporaneous value. Refuting the standard narrative that society becomes more progressive, thus dating prior works as more conservative, she writes "The sonnet sequence… kept her from being lost entirely as western culture became more conservative about women's roles and abilities."

Finally, one of the most interesting facets of these essays is the reward they promise for the effort, which they acknowledge may be challenging, to "work through" the material. McEntyre, discussing the "contract between writer and reader," explicitly describes a story as a "challenge." Paul Willis recognizes and addresses the benefits of that labor:

> The more of the poem [*The Faerie Queen*] that students are required to read, the more they invariably enjoy it. This is something of a paradox, but I think it is true for our reading of any good writer who may at first seem tiresome and difficult. Much of the barrier lies in our own impatience. Great works of literature are meant to be taken in at length and at leisure, and Spenser more than most writers forces us to slow down. Readers who allow themselves to be absorbed in the world of *The Faerie Queene* begin to cross a threshold of appreciation and understanding. As they go to work on the poem, the poem goes to work on them. *The Fairie Queene* is not only about magic; it is magic.

Moving the focus to James, Marilyn McEntyre further explores how that hard-won magic is practically meaningful in our fast-paced and complex world:

> Slowing down, for a contemporary reader, is a countercultural act… And as James himself once put it, "We only understand things in relation." It is in the web of connection that meaning is caught on the wing.
>
> And so [the opening page of *The Ambassadors*] prevents us from indulging our vulgar appetites for action, information, and explanation—the fast-food of fiction. It prevents us from leaping to conclusions. It schools us in the very patience it demands.
>
> This discipline, the arduous training in reflection, reconsideration, invention, the capacity to "dwell in possibility," the "negative capability" that doesn't strive after easy or swift resolution, is one of James' great gifts to the reader. I would go so far as to call it virtue. To read him well is to practice certain virtues that lay the ground for compassionate listening.

> James offers an antidote to a culture suffering from lack of leisure, lack of nuance, and an excess of hyperbole. To read him is to restore a certain balance of judgment, to take a hard look at our culture from just outside its pale, and to wander in a well-made house of fiction, admiring the architecture of its spacious sentences, finding ourselves, if we receive the grace of its hospitality, surprisingly at home.

That these texts are challenging is non-controversial. But the transformative and countercultural, healing effect of reading them is reasserted in different ways throughout these essays. When Anne Hawkins, in the final paragraph of her intensely personal essay, writes "*The Iliad* is always there," it means far more than the literal words would suggest. It suggests that Homer can always, as Randall Vandermey says of Dante, "initiate movement along a spiritual axis" with every reading. A final and perhaps most profound consistent argument, then, may be the capacity for these works still to be life-changing at both the societal and the personal level. In an era where so many seek to change their distracted lives both outwardly and inwardly, turning to treasured and acknowledged masters in that art of transformation seems to meet a widely felt need. In these pages, we may all find ourselves surprisingly, and happily, at home indeed.

Seth C. Hawkins, MD
Morganton, North Carolina

CHAPTER 1

WHY READ HOMER AT A TIME LIKE THIS?

ANNE HUNSAKER HAWKINS

My favorite book is, and has always been, Homer's *The Iliad*. I first read the story of the fall of Troy when I was ten, in a collection of fables—many of them illustrated—called *Bullfinch's Mythology*. I bought the book for ten cents; it was a dusty, mildewy edition buried in a stack of books in the corner of an equally dusty, mildewy antique store (my mother loved shopping for antiques). The editor of this collection, Thomas Bullfinch, was a Victorian gentleman who wrote for "the reader of elegant literature," eliminating parts of stories that would be "offensive to pure taste and good morals." Curious. It's hard to think of much in the stories of the Greek gods and heroes that would be left if Bullfinch were really to conform with his stated principle of censorship. Zeus "ravishes" countless young maidens; Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother; and then there are all the atrocities that distinguish the house of Atreus. As for the story of Troy—it begins when a princely houseguest runs off with his host's wife, and consists of a series of brutal, savage killings of all kinds in the war that results.

Bullfinch attempted to make his text even more worthy of the reader's attention by including a scattering of literary quotations from the likes of Pope, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Cowper, Byron, Swift, and Milton. I regularly skipped over all these edifying quotations, though I always enjoyed the illustrations. And I loved the stories—especially the story of the *The Iliad*. Tomboy as I was at that time, I identified with Achilleus—a name I pronounced as A-chill-es (with the "ch" as in "cheese" and all the syllables equally accented)—the brilliant, god-like hero who is also as selfish, petty, and fractious as a child. Hektor, with his sense of responsibility and his ties to wife and child, seemed much less interesting.

I read the whole poem for the first time in a freshman Humanities course, using Richmond Lattimore's splendid translation. The story was still immensely powerful to me, though I read it differently than I had as a child.

It was in the early years of the cultural phenomenon known as "the sixties," and this time I was on the side of the Trojans. I was studying Freud in another course, and so wrote an essay analyzing the story of the fall of Troy as an allegory of growing up, where Id (Troy) was besieged, invaded, and finally destroyed by Ego (the Greeks). Just as Troy was fated to fall, so also was the transition from childhood into adulthood predetermined by physiology. And both entailed tragic loss. I also saw the poem as a dramatization of Freud's two great energies in human psychic life—Thanatos, or the death instinct, and Eros, the life instinct. The world of the poem, I argued, is one governed by Thanatos and its primary instrument, anger. But Eros is present throughout the poem as the cause of the war (Paris's taking Helen from Menelaos); as a diversion from the fighting when Aphrodite brings Paris to Helen's bed; and as a backdrop to the fighting in the amatory relations of Zeus and Hera, wrapped in a golden cloud.

Several years later, during the Vietnam War, I returned to *The Iliad* to help explain my sense of revulsion over warfare. Once again, I was on the side of the Trojans. The Greeks seemed to me epitomized by brutal Agamemnon, who slaughtered terrified young men even as they knelt and begged for mercy. His shield, with its image of "the blank-eyed face of the Gorgon with her stare of horror" (11. 36-7) seemed to symbolize the awfulness of war. I imagined this fierce, seasoned warrior bearing down on those hapless Trojan adolescents with his sword and that awful shield. . . and I cringed when I read about the appalling ways in which Agamemnon delivered them to the dark realm of Hades. Two brothers, Peisandros and Hippolochos, plead with Agamemnon to take them for ransom instead of killing them. But they find no pity. Agamemnon mocks their plea and proceeds to slaughter both of them, killing Hippolochos by first cutting away his arms and then sending him "spinning like a log down the battle" (11.146-7).

Inspired by Simone Weil's brilliant wartime commentary, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, I saw the poem as an indictment of war. With the attitude of rationalism, certitude, and cynicism that can characterize nineteen-year-olds, it seemed all too clear to me that the elaborate story of Paris and the golden apple, along with the cuckolded Menelaos' need to avenge himself on the Greeks, was only an excuse for a raid motivated by greed on the part of the Greek chieftains. Here was Troy, an incredibly wealthy city, and here were all these Greek tribes who maintained themselves by plunder. To my mind, the poem demonstrated how human beings rationalize war and justify killing. The analogy with the Vietnam War seemed to me blatant.

Beyond this, in Weil's choice of the word "force" rather than "war" to characterize the relevance of *The Iliad* in the twentieth century, she teaches us to see all the many ways in which the human spirit can be limited, crippled, and deformed. Other kinds of "force" might include racism and bigotry, oppressive political systems, religious dogmatism, the mindlessness of bureaucracy and institutions. That Weil means to suggest other kinds of force, as well as war, is supported by her remarks on "the true subject," the center of *The Iliad*: "In [*The Iliad*] at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to."

Many years later, watching my twelve-year-old son play soccer, I thought again of *The Iliad* and I wrote a poem about the comparison. After all, there were similarities between competitive sport and Iliadic warfare: a code of rules and conventions, two opposing teams, moments of glory for individual players.

> Blond hair streaming down behind you race down the field,
> Lithe, strong, and I—for an instant—see
> the horse-hair helmets of Iliadic warriors,
> Helmets crested with horse-hair tossing
> Their manes in the hard sunlight.

The Greeks had a name for those moments of achievement we have all experienced—those times when it seems we can do anything, when we seem unbeatable. They called it *aristeia*.

> Our boys,
> Blocking, heading, turning, then kicking the ball,
> Are warlike at their play. Each one has his moment of *aristeia*,
> a glancing, glorious triumph
> where, admired by all,
> heroic, godlike,
> in time
> above time,
> supreme over all mortals,
> sheathed in glittering bronze,
> plumes nodding terribly, the swift-footed warrior
> racing
> like the fire
> like the wind
> tears down the battlefield, scattering his foes.

But this reading was markedly different than all the other times I immersed myself in the world of *The Iliad*. This time I felt sorrow for Hecuba and Andromache—and beyond them, for all the countless mothers throughout history who have mourned the deaths of their sons in battle—even as I gave thanks that my son was engaged only in a soccer game, and not a war.

> I watch—
> not like Hecuba mourning
> not like Helen grieving
> not like Andromache weeping . . . .
>
> ...we mothers, now, we
> do not mourn our boys' returning to the fray,
> we do not grieve; we do not weep,
> we, mothers, watching—
> though their youth and beauty and spirit seem
> more precious, more fragile,
> when shadowed by those high-hearted warriors
> with their far-reaching spears, their shining helms, and their dark pain.

My most recent personal encounter with *The Iliad* occurred many years later. I was teaching the poem to physicians at the medical college where I had a position in the Humanities Department—and, at the same time, I was being brought up (one year early) for tenure. I was turned down and told to go through the process again the next year. There was never any real reason given for the decision. I had worked very hard during my five years at the College, and my academic credentials were impeccable. I felt insulted, humiliated, and stunned.

This time, as in my childhood encounter with Bullfinch's version of the poem, my sympathies were with Achilleus. But my reasons for identifying with him were totally different—as different as is a ten-year-old child from a forty-five-year-old woman. Reading *The Iliad* proved to be a powerful and ultimately healing experience, as the story of Achilleus (in the first nine books) became my story. It is a convention in the world of *The Iliad* for warriors to be rewarded for their accomplishments with prizes—the prize supposedly being commensurate to their performance in battle. Achilleus finds that his prize has been taken away from him, rather arbitrarily, by the Greek chieftain Agamemnon. (Ordinarily I would have been outraged by the fact that this prize was a young Trojan girl, Chryseis, but the overarching story was more powerful at this moment than my feminist sympathies.) Achilleus has been insulted; his honor has been violated, and he responds with anger and the decision to withdraw from the fighting. Like Achilleus, I had worked hard within my own sphere (the

academic world), observing all the rules and conventions, succeeding in everything I took on, and giving of myself in every way I could. Tenure was my prize. When tenure was denied to me, I went through the same responses as did Achilleus: humiliation, anger, and a kind of depression or psychological withdrawal that seemed the same as Achilleus' refusal to go on fighting.

During this period of withdrawal I found myself examining the values of academia, just as Achilleus found himself examining the values of the world of heroic warfare. And I came out of this experience, as did Achilleus, with a different set of values. Achilleus returns to the fighting when his best friend, Patroklos, is killed: he no longer cares whether he receives prizes or not. In fact, the funeral of Patroklos is marked by Achilleus' ceremonial giving away of gifts, rather than receiving prizes or booty. My "return," psychologically, to the academic world was accompanied by the decision to find other ways of using my knowledge and skills besides writing scholarly papers for an academic audience. I found that I no longer cared about tenure, or promotion either, and I refused to become involved in the tenure process the following year. Instead, my energies were directed towards other goals. I began attending the pediatric HIV clinic at the College of Medicine, got to know the children, their parents and foster parents, and spent a sabbatical year writing a book about them. The book was intended for a general audience, the purpose being to raise public consciousness about the plight of these children.

For me, as for Achilleus, the experience of emotional withdrawal from the academic world was one of transformation. Psychologists call this phenomenon "incubation": taking time out from our everyday world—and, perhaps most importantly, taking time away from our everyday minds—so that we can access deeper parts of our psyche. I now understood just what the idea of time really means. It is not an archaic, scholarly concept that has been dragged out to explain an outdated text. Instead, time refers to a sense of honor or self-worth that occurs in the context of any particular culturally constructed world (such as heroic warfare, for Achilleus; or academia, for me) and that is reflected in the ways in which others evaluate and reward one's efforts.

Many have remarked on the way in which *The Iliad* seems timeless—a poem that individuals throughout the history of Western civilization can and have related to their personal lives. In earlier centuries, people often read the poem in the original Greek. Now, though, almost all of us read it in translation. While there is certainly a loss in this, there are excellent translations available. I have always loved Lattimore's 1951 translation of *The Iliad*. Even when Robert Fagles' acclaimed translation become available in 1990, in an edition with a wonderful introductory essay

by Bernard Knox, I found that I still clung to Lattimore's version. Perhaps I was just used to Lattimore's cadences. In translating the epithets, for example, Lattimore's "the goddess of the white arms, Hera" seems so much more powerfully Homeric than Fagles' "white-armed Hera," and for the same reason, I prefer Lattimore's "Hektor of the shining helm" or "Hektor of the bronze helm" to Fagles' "Hector, helmet flashing" or "Hector helmed in bronze."

Undoubtedly, Fagles' translation reads more smoothly than Lattimore's, and it avoids Lattimore's frequent syntactic awkwardness. Certainly it is more modern in idiom. Thus I was not surprised when my thirteen-year-old son, during the arduous process of learning ancient Greek, preferred Fagles' translation of *The Iliad* to Lattimore's. But for me, Lattimore seems to have better captured that curious combination of majesty and simplicity that is characteristic of Homeric Greek. The following examples illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of these two fine translations. Compare Lattimore's and Fagles' versions of Homer's formulaic description of the death of the young warrior Démokoón. Lattimore writes: "Odysseus struck him with the spear, in anger for his companion, / in the temple, and the bronze spearhead drove through the other / temple also, so that a mist of darkness clouded both eyes. / He fell, thunderously, and his armour clattered upon him" (4.501-4). The equivalent in Fagles' is: "Odysseus speared him straight through one temple / and out the other punched the sharp bronze point / and the dark came swirling thick across his eyes— / down he crashed, armor clanging against his chest" (4.579-82).

Or compare Lattimore's and Fagles' versions of the passage where, after the death of Patroklos, the goddess Thetis tries to persuade Achilleus to go back into the fighting. Lattimore writes: "Go then and summon into assembly the fighting Achaians, / and unsay your anger against Agamemnon, shepherd of the people, / and arm at once for the fighting, and put your war strength upon you" (19. 34-6). And Fagles: "So go and call the Argive warriors to the muster: / renounce your rage at the proud commander Agamemnon, / then arm for battle quickly, don your fighting power!" (19. 40-2) Lattimore's translation is the more wordy, but it is also much more appealing to the ear. Both are fine translations, but I find Lattimore's "unsay your anger" much more Homeric than Fagles' "renounce your rage"; the same is true of "put your war strength upon you" compared to "don your fighting power."

Whichever of these two translations readers prefer, I think it likely they will find, as I do, that the poem is not only powerful and profound but also helpful in giving us perspective on modern reality. For example, there

is the theme of war, and the related theme of death, which are certainly relevant to today's world. Modern military technology is of course far more sophisticated—and lethal—than it was three thousand years ago, but the impulse to wage war on a neighboring tribe or culture, and the suffering, destruction, and brutality that go along with this impulse, seem little different. The world of *The Iliad* does recognize the experience of peace, which appears throughout in the poem's many similes, where references to tilling the fields or growing crops or shepherding animals punctuate the din of battle. These images serve to remind us that there is another way of relating to each other than warfare. But for Homer, the aggressive impulse that is the basis of war and of the violence that always accompanies it seems an inevitable part of life.

Though its ostensible subject is the Trojan war, *The Iliad* can be seen as a poem about death—and the inescapable fact of mortality. The fact that I taught in an academic medical center has made me especially aware of Homer's treatment of death. In the United States, today, most of us will die in a hospital or nursing home—eighty-five percent by some counts—often after a lengthy "battle" against forces of disease and age. Indeed, warfare is a not inappropriate metaphor for what we will experience as patients. Physicans are frequently caught up in military thinking as they "fight the disease" with whatever pharmaceutical or technological "weapons" seem most effective, and patients regularly use images of warfare in describing their experiences of illness and treatment. War in *The Iliad* is accepted as an inevitable part of life, caused partly by human choices and partly by forces beyond human control—the same is true of sickness and disability. In a sense, the Iliadic battle that is fought out on the plains of Troy also takes place in our modern hospitals every day.

What can we learn from *The Iliad* that will help us better understand dying? It is worth reminding ourselves, as we explore the Homeric meaning of death, that there is no real afterlife in Homer's worldview: after death there is only Hades, a shadowy realm to which the shades of the dead descend. Surely this view of the afterlife, so very different from the elaborate eschatologies of the Christian tradition, conditions the way death is understood in the poem. At first glance, it would seem that *The Iliad* represents the "good death" as one that is heroic, brave, and in the service of a great cause. The classic statement of the heroic code in *The Iliad* is Sarpedon's justification for going into the fighting: ". . . seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us / in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them, / let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others" (12. 326-8). Put differently—since death is inevitable, one might as well die with glory.

I used to see this passage, with its cheerful, youthful acceptance of a glorious death, as epitomizing Homer's treatment of death. But now, from the perspective of middle age, I find other aspects of the poem's depiction of this subject much more interesting, and more profound. I believe that this great poem can teach us, in the twenty-first century, some important lessons about death: the need for a direct and honest confrontation with the physical facts of dying, and the primacy of family members and loved ones.

Much of the poem is taken up with description of the myriad ways in which men die while fighting at Troy. Some are great warriors, but many are young men who are mentioned only in the brief eulogy that marks their deaths—poignant vignettes called *androktasiai*. There are over two hundred of these in the poem. The Homeric *androktlasia* almost always begins with a graphic depiction of the way the young warrior dies. The young Harpalion is hit "beside the right buttock, so that the arrow / was driven on through under the bone to fix in the bladder" (13. 651-2) And Ilioneus is stabbed with a spear underneath the brow, at the base of the eye so that the eyeball is pushed out and "the spear went clean through / the eye-socket and tendon of the neck" (14. 493-96). These detailed descriptions of the trajectory of a weapon through the human body create a powerful sense of the three-dimensionality of the body that emphasizes its vulnerability.

The pathos of death is enhanced by coupling such descriptions of exactly how a young man dies with mention of the mother, or father, or young wife, who are left behind to mourn his passing. Harpalion and Polydoros are young men cherished by parents who will grieve their loss. Harpalion was accompanied by his father when he traveled to Troy to join the fighting. And when the young man's body is returned to the city, his father walks beside the chariot, "weeping tears" (13. 643-4, 658). Polydoros, the youngest and "most beloved" of all the sons of King Priam, who has been forbidden because of his youth to join the fighting, is killed by Achilleus even though he is behind the front lines of the Trojan army (20.407-18). Polydoros's death foreshadows the death of Hektor, that other son of Priam, and the intense mourning that dominates the last book of the poem. It is our relationships with others that make us most fully human: everyone is the son or daughter or spouse—and perhaps the mother or father—of someone else. In the tragic world of *The Iliad*, the suffering of death is intimately bound up with the grief of those who survive us.

Sometimes it is those aspects of the poem that seem most foreign to us that are the most helpful. For example, there are all those gods who hover over the fighting, sometimes even descending to take part in it. I've always been intrigued by the role of the gods in *The Iliad*. When I taught the poem, I encouraged my students to think of the gods as narrative

explanations for "the way things are"; as images of the deep, emotional, and psychological forces like anger, erotic passion, envy, or jealousy that govern our lives. Juno reigns when we are jealous; Aphrodite during moments of sexual passion; Ares at times of rage. Each of these divinities owns an arc within the totality of all things, and each of these arcs comprises a microcosm of its own, a world with its own rules, its laws, its logic. I always found it interesting that the world of Athena is very different from the world of Ares—though both are divinities associated with war: Athena seems to stand for heroic warfare with its elaborate codes of conduct, whereas Ares represents war as lawless, brutal slaughter. No reader of *The Iliad* could be unaware of the fact that the Greek gods and goddesses are forever quarreling with each other. If the gods are "the way things are," then by extension, the tendency of the gods to quarrel among themselves tells us that conflict is a part of the ways things are. Reality itself is conflictual: one god will demand that we perform a particular action, and then another god will punish us for doing it.

Perhaps because I began reading Greek mythology during childhood, polytheism has always seemed more true to my experience of life than monotheism. There is no problem of theodicy with the Greek pantheon as there is in the Judeo-Christian traditions: the Greek gods and goddesses are definitely not good (at best they are amoral), they are not all-powerful (the gods only implement the dictates of Fate), and, with certain exceptions, they do not love or care about us either as individuals or as a race (most often they are indifferent, or interested in human life as a form of entertainment).

There are particular images in the poem involving the gods that, for me, seem to sum up certain ways of feeling or responding. For example, there is the episode early in *The Iliad* when Achilleus, furiously angry at Agamemnon, is just about to draw his sword and attack him. At this crucial moment Athena descends, stands behind Achilleus and grabs him by the hair to get his attention, telling him that she has come "to stay your anger" (L 197-215). I find this episode a wonderful analogy to all those times when, as I'm just about to do something, I'm suddenly stopped from doing it by a kind of monition, as though from outside, and I pause and reconsider. Or there is the later episode when, during a council of the Greek chieftains, Agamemnon explains his earlier, disastrous decision to seize the prize of Achilleus as not his own fault: ". . .yet I am not responsible / but Zeus is, and Destiny, and Erinys the mist-walking" (19. 85-6). Most of us have, at some time in our lives, experienced a particular decision or action as crazy, insane. "How could I have done that!" or "I can't believe I actually said

that!" we might say, indicating that something we did or said seems alien to our sense of who we are.

There are times when the gods inspire us to do something; there are other times when they compel us towards some action. An example of inspiration is the moment when Diomedes rides into battle in his chariot and finds the goddess Athena standing there beside him, acting as his charioteer. Diomedes will excel in battle that day; he will perform feats of bravery well beyond what he thinks himself able to do. There are contemporary counterparts to this image of a hero aided by a god or goddess--for example, the athlete who gets her "second wind" and wins the race, or the musician who finds himself playing better than he ever had before. I'm especially fond of Athena's words to Diomedes, as she stands there beside him in his chariot: "I have taken away the mist from your eyes . . . /so that you may well recognize the god and the mortal" (5.127-8). Once he can recognize the difference, she tells him that he should avoid confronting any divinity, except for Aphrodite—the goddess of love, it seems, is "fair game" on the battlefield. In life we need to know which adversaries (which challenges, which goals) to take on, and which are simply a part of "the way things are" and thus best left alone.

But the gods influence our lives in other ways than inspiration. *The Iliad* also shows us, as in the relationship between Helen, the most beautiful of all mortal women, and the goddess Aphrodite, how the gods can compel us to do things we ordinarily wouldn't want to do. Helen is compelled, quite literally, to share Paris's bed. She doesn't like him and she doesn't admire him, but the compulsion of sexual attraction is a force much more powerful than her own personal feelings about him (3. 390-420). Patroklos' relationship with the gods is also one of compulsion. His *aristeia* is not the glorious, brilliant display of prowess that characterized Diomedes, but rather something furious, possessed, almost crazed. It is none other than Zeus himself, from on high, who "drove on the fury in the heart of Patroklos." Patroklos here is almost a sacrificial victim: his individuality has been taken away from him in the act of impersonating Achilleus. He knows no restraint; he can observe no limits. Dressed in the armor of his friend, Patroklos plunges "in a huge blind fury" into the battle—and towards his death (16.685-91).

Of course the presence of the gods is an aspect of the religious thinking that characterized the era during which the poem was created. A distinctive aspect of the poem itself is the epic simile. Indeed, this is a device that seems unique in Western literature, at least, to *The Iliad* (the similes in *The Odyssey*, the other poem attributed to Homer, are very different). The

extended similes of *The Iliad* are usually lengthy comparisons of some aspect of the world of heroic warfare to some facet of the ordinary, everyday world. The simile halts the action of the poem, freezing a particular scene of a warrior (or warriors) killing others. It is like what happens when we pause to reflect on some activity we are engaged in—a process that interrupts the action even as it explores its meaning. Homeric similes serve several purposes: they offer the reader momentary relief from the savagery of the battlefield, and they give warfare a wider and deeper meaning by comparing it to another order of things—most commonly, human activities during peacetime or events drawn from the world of nature. Some similes are fairly conventional, as when the Greek army is compared to a cluster of swarming bees or a hero to a wild beast. Others are far more unusual, and more functional, such as comparing the struggle over the slain body of Patroklos to the art of stretching the hide of a slain bull.

The more times I read the poem, the more often I notice and respond to the similes. The ones I like best are those, like the one about Patroklos, that seem to be strikingly dissimilar from the main narrative. My favorite is when Homer likens the slaying of the youthful Euphorbos to the fall of a young olive tree, uprooted by a sudden wind. The passage begins with a graphic description of exactly how this young man is slain and concludes with his slayer bending over to strip the armor from his body. In between these two actions, Homer interpolates a long epic simile:

> As some
> slip of an olive tree strong-growing that a man raises
> in a lonely place, and drenched it with generous water, so that
> it blossoms into beauty, and the blasts of winds from all quarters
> tremble it, and it bursts into pale blossoming. But then
> a wind suddenly in a great tempest descending upon it
> wrenches it out of its stand and lays it at length on the ground (17. 52-58)

This comparison, coming directly after a graphic description of the young man's brutal death, seems totally inappropriate and yet at the same time eerily fitting. At first glance, Euphorbos' death at the hands of Menelaos seems nothing like the destruction of an olive tree by a great wind. Or is it? We feel that it both is and is not, and the success of this passage turns on this paradox.

For me, the special pathos of this simile derives from the way the "slip" of a tree is represented as vulnerable and fragile, "trembling" in the wind—and in the nurturing human presence of the man who, in a "lonely place," tends the tree. The olive tree in its vulnerability of course contrasts with the greater strength of the wind that destroys it. At one level the great

wind is a figure for Menelaos, the superior warrior who so easily dispatches the young Euphorbos. At a deeper level, though, the strong wind represents the destructive violence of the battle, sanctioned by the gods, that has swept Euphorbos into its action.

The olive tree simile halts the action of the poem, freezing the scene of warriors killing other warriors. It is like what happens when we pause to reflect on some activity we are engaged in—a process that interrupts the action as it explores its meaning. The simile appears to take us abruptly out of the world of warfare and into the pastoral, peacetime world of fields and gardens. But at a deeper level, through the image of a tempestuous wind suddenly descending on the tree and ripping it out of the ground, the simile reminds us of the presence of destructive elements in the natural world as well. Neither the care with which the young tree is tended nor its own strong-growing vitality avail against the wind that first brings it to "pale blossoming" and then lays it at length upon the ground. The same force that helps create and sustain life also destroys it. The simile reminds us of the fragility of all things that are mortal.

And this seems to me—right now, at this time in my life—to get at the very heart of the meaning of *The Iliad*. I realize only too well that all that I love and cherish can be taken away from me in the blink of an eye. Notice that there is no divine paraphernalia encumbering this lovely simile: no god intends to strike down and destroy the young olive tree. And yet the Greek divinities, with all their gloriously amoral carryings on, can easily coexist with the simile's reality. The world view proposed through the simile is characterized on the one hand by human need, human effort, and the urge to nourish, love, and cherish; and on the other by random forces that can destroy in an instant what took years to develop. Happiness, for all of us, is contingent on forces outside us.

It seems to me Matthew Arnold may have had *The Iliad* in mind when he wrote that wonderful conclusion to "Dover Beach":

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another . . . .
> ... we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The answer to the question, "Why read Homer at a time like this?" is that it is a poem that continues over time to teach, console, and inspire us. *The Iliad* is always there, something we can return to again and again, finding what we need and want at that particular time in our lives. And we