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A Homer for the twenty-first century

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A Homer for the Twenty-first Century

STEPHEN SCULLY

THIS BOOK* lives up to its title, discussing major trends of Homeric scholarship and approaches to Homer in the twentieth century. More often than not, however, its insightful and engaging essays treat Homer as artifact, too frequently forgetting to bring us back to the poetry itself. For that reason, in section one I offer an alternative model to approaching Homer, looking at divergent responses to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as literature from the English Renaissance to the present. The call at the end of this essay for a twenty-first-century conference on Homer also has this model in mind.

I.

“THE CLASSICS can console. But not enough.”

So ends the title poem of *Sea Grapes* (1976), Derek Walcott’s fifth volume of poetry. The poem supposes that a far-off sail in the Caribbean “could be Odysseus, / home-bound on the Aegean,” though Walcott’s seafarer,

under gnarled sour grapes, is
like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa’s name
in every gull’s outcry.¹

For Walcott, it is patronizing for later cultures to think of art chronologically; either works of art live in the present or not at all. In this view, Walcott is certainly not alone.² As in “Sea Grapes,” there is almost no lag or gap in time or space be-

*Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood, eds., *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 300 pages, \$125.00. Cited hereafter as GrGr.

tween when “Troy lost its old flame” and now, when “the great hexameters come / to finish up as Caribbean surf.” Whether then or now, whether “sea-wanderer or the one on shore,” we are forever caught in the same time-weary struggle:

The ancient war
between obsession and responsibility
will never finish and has been the same.

Homer, simultaneously our contemporary and our memory, can record and console. But of course not enough.

Walcott’s seasoned vantage point is a far cry from that of George Chapman, the first translator into English of the *Iliad* (1611) and the *Odyssey* (1614–15). In the same year as Chapman’s *Iliad* England saw the first printing of the King James Bible. For Chapman, it is Homer who can save England’s maimed soul. Writing to Prince Henry in a verse preface for a preliminary edition of the first twelve books of the *Iliad* (1608), Chapman professes that an Englished Homer will make England walk tall and enflame the hearts of her people to acts of glory:

Nor have we soules to purpose if their loves
Of fitting objects be not so inflam’d.
How much, then, were this kingdome’s maine soule maim’d
To want this great inflamer of all powers
That move in humane soules? All Realmes but yours
Are honor’d with him, and hold blest that State
That have his workes to reade and contemplate—
In which Humanitie to her height is raisede,
Which all the world (yet none enough) hath praisede.
(32–40)

About Homer’s Muse, Chapman goes on to say:

And see how like the Phoenix she renews
Her age and starrie feathers in your sunne—
Thousands of yeares attending, everie one
Blowing the holy fire and throwing in

Their seasons, kingdomes, nations that have bin
Subverted in them; lawes, religions, all
Offerd to Change and greedie Funerall,
Yet still your Homer lasting, living, raining,
And proves how firme Truth builds in Poet's faining.
(53-61)³

There is no collapsing of time, past and present, in Chapman. And contrary to Walcott, who takes from Homer the subverting passions of the human heart (even Troy was snuffed out by adultery, ancient wars never die), Chapman at the beginning of the modern era sees in Homer a bulwark against the human seasons "all / Offerd to Change and greedie Funerall," offering firm Truth instead by which even a new people under a new sun can build their ship of state and steer a noble course.

Other twentieth-century poets draw from Homer an even bleaker vision of despair than the one in Walcott's "Sea Grapes." A striking example is W. H. Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" (1952). Reading the shield through Keats' romanticized vision in the "Grecian Urn," Auden will not have Hephaistos sculpt

ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,

but people in "a weed-choked field," a morally barren world where behind barbed wire "bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)" and

A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

There is no distance in Auden's poem between this nameless modern totalitarianism and Achilles' pitiless force:

The thin-lipped armorer,

Hephaestos, hobbled away.
 Thetis of the shining breasts
 Cried out in dismay
 At what the god had wrought
 To please her son, . . .

Recoiling from modern atrocities, Auden hardly offers a nuanced reading of the *Iliad*. In Homer, Hephaistos depicts on Achilles' shield scenes of human joy and life's continuities—a reverend king presiding over a harvest festival, young men and maidens dancing, a city at peace, all cast within the setting of earth, sun, moon, and stars and framed by the River Ocean. How these scenes relate to the death-embracing bearer of the shield is far from obvious. Many twentieth-century scholars suggest that Hephaistos' life-renewing images offer a glimpse of a world soon to be destroyed and they regard the relation between Hephaistos' artwork and Achilles as ironical. Perhaps so, but if we follow Homer's lead a different perspective emerges. Rather than taking comfort in these arms when Thetis presents them to her son, the Myrmidons are filled with terror and flee. A similar terror, verbal echoes suggest, causes Hector to tremble and run when he sees Achilles in hot pursuit (for the Myrmidon flight, see *Il.* 19.14–15; for Hector's flight, see 22.136–37). By contrast, it is Achilles who looks upon Hephaistos' arms with anger and prolonged delight (19.15–19).⁴ The anger is surely directed against Hector, but why the delight?

Auden's poem flattens out Homeric character and ekphrasis, making one-dimensional what in Homer is complex and interpretatively challenging. There is no inkling in Auden that Hephaistos' arms in the *Iliad* elevate Achilles as if they are wings (19.386), nor that Zeus instructs Athena to infuse Achilles with divine nectar and ambrosia (19.340–54). For Auden the link between the “strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles” and modern totalitarian barbarity is bitter, straightforward, and without ambiguity. Robert Lowell, in “The Killing of Lykaon” (1962), a fine translation of *Iliad* 1.1–7 and 22.99–135, has similarly reduced Achilles to a fig-

ure of relentless savagery. To Lykaon he says and says again: “You must die, / and die and die and die.”⁵

Christopher Logue’s Achilles isn’t much different. Of all the twentieth-century depictions, Logue’s, when it is on, is the sharpest. In his version of *Iliad* books 16–19, he leaves out Hephaistos’ making of the shield and he says nothing overtly about the Myrmidon flight, but he does tell us to great effect how Achilles reacts to the arms:

Achilles saw his armour in that instant
And its ominous radiance flooded his heart.
Bright pads with toggles crossed behind the knees,
Bodice of fitted tungsten, pliable straps;
His shield as round and rich as moons in spring;
His sword’s haft parked between sheaves of grey obsidian
From which a lucid blade stood out, leaf-shaped, adorned
With running spirals.
And for his head a welded cortex; yes,
Though it is noon, the helmet screams against the light;
Scratches the eye; so violent it can be seen
Across three thousand years.

The euphonious “ominous radiance flooded his heart”—perhaps inspired by Chapman’s “From his eyes (as if the day-starre rose) / A radiance terrifying men did all the state enclose”—captures well Homer’s description of the light radiating from both Achilles’ eyes as he inspects the arms and from Hephaistos’ metalwork. The many asyndetons make the pacing rapid, Logue’s description of the arms is vividly seen, and the diction with its biting consonants is flinty and hard-edged. The “yes” helps bring the scene into focus, drawing the eye in before screams and blinding light scratch it. With this “yes,” modern readers across three thousand years have perhaps replaced the Myrmidons, our eyes scarred by the terrible sight of Achilles’ armor. Logue echoes this view of violence, again collapsing time, in “GBH” (Grievous Bodily Harm, a stock formula in the British criminal law code), when Achilles says of himself: “I, the para-

digm / Of all creation's violent hierarchy.”

Chapman certainly does not shy away from Achilles' savagery, but what fascinates him more than this focus on thuggery is the vast cosmological exchange between the mortal hero and the divine. We see by comparison how the moderns focus only on Achilles' brutality. Here is how Chapman depicts (in rousing fourteeners) the Greek fear and Achilles' delight when Thetis brings the god's armor down to earth. The passage begins with Thetis addressing her son:

‘Do thou embrace this Fabricke of a god, whose hand before
Nere forg'd the like, and such as yet no humane shoulder wore.’

Thus (setting downe) the precious mettall of the armes was such
That all the roome rung with the weight of every slendrest touch.
Cold tremblings tooke the Myrmidons; none durst sustaine, all fear'd
T'oppose their eyes. Achilles, yet, as soone as they appear'd,
Sterne Anger enterd. From his eyes (as if the day-starre rose)
A radiance terrifying men did all the state enclose.
At length he tooke into his hands the rich gift of the god,
And (much pleasd to behold the art that in the shield he show'd)
He brake forth into this applause . . .

(Chapman 19.111–21; Homer 19.8–20)

When translating the almost identical language describing Hector's flight from Achilles, Chapman deviates from his own version at 19.15–16 (Homer 19.14–15) and, with magnificent expansion, embellishes the scene extensively:

[Achilles'] bright armes like day came glittering on,
Like fire-light, or the light of heaven shot from the rising Sun.
This sight outwrought discourse; cold Feare shooke Hector from
his stand.
No more stay now; all ports were left; he fled in feare the hand
Of that Feare-master . . .

(Chapman 22.117–21; Homer 22.134–37)

Chapman seems most at home when depicting the gods coming down from above to engage with Achilles—

downe from heaven Athenia stoopt and shind
About his temples, . . .

.
and tooke
Achilles by the yellow curles
(Chapman 1.196–200; Homer 1.194–97)

—or the hero’s capacity to rise up to meet the divine, as when Achilles first tries on Hephaistos’ arms: “they were nimble wings, and made so light his spirit / That from the earth the princely Captaine they took up to aire” (Chapman 19.372–73; Homer 19.384–86).

A century later, in the more refined sensibilities of England’s Augustan Age, Alexander Pope renders the *Iliad* with elegance but, all too often, with a taming of Homer, as well. Consider, for example, Pope’s version of Achilles’ first trying on Hephaistos’ arms. Here, Pope compounds Homer’s winged metaphor with a swimming one:

The Chief beholds himself with wond’ring eyes;
His Arms he poises, and his Motions tries;
Buoy’d by some inward Force, he seems to swim,
And feels a Pinion lifting ev’ry Limb.
(Pope 19.416–19; Homer 19.384–86)⁶

Or consider Pope’s account of Hector’s flight:

And on [Achilles’] Breast the beamy Splendors shone
Like *Jove’s* own lightning, or the rising Sun.
As *Hector* sees, unusual Terrors rise,
Struck by some God, he fears, recedes, and flies.
(Pope 22.177–80; Homer 22.134–37)

The first three lines of this last passage, describing Achilles’ beamy splendors and Hector’s unusual terrors, are inert and appear pale against Chapman’s visualization of Hector’s cold fear and Achilles’ fire-light attack, but Pope’s last line is breathtaking for its sound patterns, economy, and chilling crescendo.

2.

MAKING THEIR WAY through the vast edifice of Homeric studies, the essayists in GrGr tend to examine those rooms devoted to political and cultural questions of reception in the twentieth century rather than those concerned with the literary art of Homer. As the editors indicate in the introduction, two themes predominate: “shifts in the academic study of Homeric epic” and “a much broader re-positioning of Homer in the cultural landscape of the twentieth century” (3). Thus perforce throughout the book, even in those essays where he is not named, Milman Parry is a pervasive presence, his theories of Homer as an oral poet having created, in Greenwood’s phrasing, a “seismic . . . culture shock” (147) and a repositioning of the terrain so that Homer is viewed now both as the ur-classic in the Western literary canon and as one among many in the study of oral literatures worldwide. The phrases “World Literature” and “Western Canon” in the book’s subtitle refer to matters of genre classification and the uses and abuses of Homer in epics (broadly understood) from sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, Albania, modern Greece, and England, and in film, lyric poetry, novels, paintings, and plays from various Mediterranean and Atlantic ports of call. For the most part the participants in the conference (Dublin, July 2004) and the essays here which grew directly from that gathering stay clear of comparative poetics and the value-laden question of how a new poem, prose narrative, or moving picture compares to Homer’s art and style. The editors, in passing, comment on the plethora of translations of Homer in the twentieth century from around the globe but thereafter pay little heed to them. The comment, however, raises the possibility of a future conference exploring how these translations render Homer’s style and what they do and do not see in the ancient poems.

GrGr is divided into four parts: “Placing Homer in [shifting cultural landscapes of] the Twentieth Century” with es-

says by Johannes Haubold and Lorna Hardwick; connections between “Scholarship and Fiction” with essays by Richard Martin, Stephen Minta, and Barbara Graziosi; “Distance [from Homer] and Form” in fiction, poetry, and film with essays by Emily Greenwood, Oliver Taplin, Gregson Davis, and Françoise Létoublon; and “Politics and Interpretation” with essays by David Ricks, Simon Goldhill, and Seth Schein. As I did not find the entries easily conforming to these categories, I shall not adhere to this arrangement in what follows.⁷

I shall first discuss how many of the artists considered in these essays—James Joyce in prose, Mike Leigh and the Coen brothers in film, and Derek Walcott, Christopher Logue, and Michael Longley in verse—use Homer in their works, and then I’ll turn to Milman Parry in art and scholarship.

As must be the case, for a creative writer and director Homer is secondary to one’s own art. Perhaps characteristic of twentieth-century pastiche and allusion, many of these artists see in Homer a repository of archetypal models, figures, and motifs to be used impressionistically, even casually. Even in Logue’s accounting of the *Iliad*, great liberties are taken with Homer: ambivalence and challenge rather than iconic reverence accompany reception, appropriation, and influence of the inherited Western masterpiece. Such freedoms liberate old Homer from hallowed status and expose qualities likely concealed in less independent reworkings of ancient epic. David Ricks, in his fine chapter on Homer in the Greek civil war, expresses this tendency succinctly when he writes of a figure like Elpenor thriving in modern times “precisely because of his lack of character; and perhaps for his operating as a symbol of the miscarrying of tradition, a case of a figure who does not benefit from—but who also escapes the trammels of—a grand narrative” (242).

The story of twentieth-century reception might well have been launched with Ezra Pound, who in the first Canto (1930, 1934), after brilliantly rendering the first hundred lines or so of *Odyssey* book 11, tells Homer to lie quiet so

that he can get on with his own poetry: “Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer” (1.68–69). Rather, primary attention falls on James Joyce who, like Pound, establishes his distance from Homer even as he loosely shapes *Ulysses* (1922) around the *Odyssey*. Joyce knows Homer’s story through prose translations which he never culled with a fine-tooth comb (though he famously imagined his own readers taking thirty years to comb through *Ulysses*). There are no simple correlations, as Stephen Minta observes in GrGr, between Bloom’s day in Dublin and Odysseus’ wanderings. While archetypal themes of homecoming and fidelity unite both works, Bloom urgently feels the need *not* to return home, especially at four o’clock in the afternoon when Molly is scheduled to receive Blazes Boylan (“boiling over Boylan”) in her house for their first rendezvous. Joyce cleverly turns this into what is conventionally called the Sirens episode, number 11 in *Ulysses*, where musical phrases distract Bloom from what’s most on his mind. In some cases, like the Wandering Rocks (10), Joyce’s episodes are taken from a few lines in Homer; in others, like the Telemachus (1), Ithaca (17), and Penelope (18) segments, Joyce spins his own story with threads from a very large Homeric tapestry. Typically, Joyce turns a Homeric episode into a tightly interwoven narrative, but in the Nausicaa episode (13) he “forced a consciously reductive reading on the story . . . focus[ing a highly complex Homeric narrative] down onto a single subject” (Minta, 103).

It is Minta’s contention that such liberties bring us closer to Homer. His prime example is Bloom’s masturbation on Sandymount Strand while surreptitiously watching the crippled Gerty MacDowell. True to the “sexually repressive climate of Joyce’s birthplace,” this edging of Bloom “out beyond all social convention” also makes “a claim on something more than the merely local” (119). Bloom’s letting loose also loosens Odysseus from the constraints of European hero worship, finally making it possible for him after several millennia “truly to have come home.” Far from a

golden age hero on a pedestal, Odysseus is brought down, by association, to the level of Bloom, enabling readers to see the ancient hero's own imperfections and returning them "to something like an authentic reading of Homer, free from the cultural accumulations of centuries" (119; cf. Martin, p. 77).

In the charming road comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Coen brothers also do little to elevate Odysseus' character. The main character of this movie, Ulysses Everett McGill, is an escaped convict, having just broken loose from a chain gang, eager to get home to his wife, Penny. This Penelope has made his absence easy for their children by telling them that their father is dead, and she does not spend sleepless nights longing for his return. The Coen brothers like to boast that they never read the *Odyssey*, or if pressed they concede that they may have read a cartoon version of it. Much in the film lends credence to this claim. Despite the opening sequence which fills the screen with a translation of the first three lines of the *Odyssey*, many scenes seem to have little to do with Homer's poem and those that do read like a Bullwinkle version of the old poem. Yet, clashing with the directors themselves, Goldhill argues in GrGr that Homeric allusions range from the "blunt and obvious" (266) to insider jokes "only for that most exclusive audience, the professional Homerist" (265). And elsewhere, he argues that some of the film's phrasings ironically echo Homer's Greek in ways that only the "professional classicist may . . . hear" (267).⁸ This is not the only instance in GrGr where an artist's claim and a critic's insight clash. If Goldhill is correct, why did the Coen brothers seek to put him and others so far off? More on this shortly.

The clash is even more pronounced between Goldhill and Mike Leigh regarding the film *Naked* (1999). At scattered moments throughout this vivid and violent movie set mostly in modern-day London, actors refer explicitly to the *Odyssey*, including one episode in the middle of the film where Johnny, an Odysseus-like figure, pulls a copy of Rieu's paperback translation of the poem from a bookshelf and

holds it out for the camera's eye to frame. To underscore this attention on the *Odyssey*, Johnny asks the girl who is temporarily residing in a borrowed flat: "Do you get it now? Do you know this? [She shakes her head.] I bet you do. You've most likely done it at school. You just can't remember. You know, like, uh, Achilles' heel, the wooden horse, Helen of Troy. You know them?" With little comprehension, the girl says, "Yeah." She is a waitress who has taken Johnny home and even prepares a bath for him before he leaves without so much as giving her a kiss. Goldhill is certainly right to claim that the scene is loosely modeled on Homer's Nausikaa story.

Yet when Goldhill asked Leigh in a letter if it mattered whether audiences saw "the Homeric structuring in *Naked*," the director proved testy, like the Coen brothers trying to warn critics off. He conceded that *Naked* was self-consciously epic, though he denied that he had any one epic or author in mind and retorted that Goldhill "should give up any hope of 'writing a Ph.D. on it'" (260). In print, too, Leigh has tried to dissuade similar efforts on the grounds that, as Goldhill puts it, "intellectual games of allusion . . . may distract from the film's raw realism" (260). One need not suppose that directors are more insightful about their art than critics or that they are entitled to the last word about their work, but in this case I can readily understand Leigh's frustration with academic reception-hunters. Many books, in addition to the *Odyssey*, are discussed in *Naked*, some at length, including multiple allusions to the Bible and biblical episodes. One also feels a Nietzschean aggression hovering over much of the film. Not all scenes bring the *Odyssey* to mind, including the opening sequence where Johnny attempts to rape a girl on the sidewalk in his hometown of Manchester before he steals a car and flees, never to go home again.

Goldhill describes well the challenges facing critics and audiences when viewing a work of art with such overt literary allusions: how much should we read into a scene? Is the perception obvious to all or layered, its full dimensions avail-

able only to a learned few? And is it always the same select few, or sometimes academic specialists and literati and other times the culturally hip young, or some other subgroup? The question could also be asked: how do we distinguish between intentional allusion and the possibility of allusion imagined or willed by the perceiver? We all struggle with such problems, especially when the perceived likeness is not straightforward but ironic, inverted, or antithetical. About *Naked*, Goldhill writes, “It is not clear how much Homer is (to be) seen . . . or whether any particular audience’s more or less informed reading should be privileged” (260). Goldhill also speaks well of “reception” in a movie like this as a “complex and multidirectional dynamic” (261), a “post-modern pastiche version of the world, a world formed through literary fragments and filmic clips . . . There is no secure intertextual frame, only ever receding circles of know-ingness. This is why ‘reception’ is a poor model for Classics today . . . It is also why the *Odyssey* is the archetypal text⁹ for so much modernist engagement with the classical past: its always already fragmented and multiform reception suits the modernist project all too well” (267).

In the quotes above, Goldhill elegantly avoids the critic’s impulse to impose a single design upon a widely roaming artistic imagination. But at other times, one has the sensation of being in a Wild West movie where homesteaders are eagerly building barbed-wire ranches to the great frustration of the artist cattle-rover as he makes his way over the open prairie, freely exploiting genres and eclectically borrowing from multiple sources. The corralling tendency, for example, seems evident when Goldhill writes about *Naked*: “The *Odyssey*’s presence in this film reminds us repeatedly of how its normative projection of family and household life is ruth-lessly destroyed in Leigh’s vision of the modern city” (258). And then: “After Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the *Odyssey* has become the modernist epic model par excellence. Leigh takes the power of epic [isn’t the *Odyssey* meant here?] to construct a normative picture of the world—but portrays a world whose

very values and structures stand against that epic grand vision. The immense anger with which this film is filled is the energy produced by the tension between the epic structuring with its symbolics and the violent, petty interactions which inhabit it and finally destroy it” (259). (The same is true in its own way of the critical allusions detected by Goldhill in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which only the Greek scholar would decipher.) At such times, Goldhill seems to imply that *Naked* is systematically reworking Homer. It is one thing for a critic to compare two literary works, and here Goldhill uses the comparison with the *Odyssey* wonderfully to reveal the edgy modernist tone of *Naked*. But it is another thing to say that one work is carefully modeled on and conceived as a close reading of another, and it is here where Leigh objects, and rightly so in my judgment.

Derek Walcott is similarly frustrated by critics. As Gregson Davis writes in this volume, “Walcott sees the Homeric narratives fundamentally as a matrix of archetypal figures, images, and motifs (his preferred epithets are ‘emblematic’ and ‘iconic’) that constitute a kind of archive for later writers and artists in the Western canon, of which Anglophone Caribbean literature is an extension” (208). To a greater extent than many, Walcott readily embraces his indebtedness to Homer and other writers, but like Leigh and others he bristles at the academic fence-builders and reception-hunters. Here’s how Walcott expresses it: “‘Oh, so much is owed to so-and-so’—I hate that. It is a patronizing way of saying about, for instance, Romare’s work [Romare Bearden, Caribbean visual artist, 1911–1988]: ‘Look at those black cutouts. They are like Greek vases.’ Yes, they may be like Greek vases, but they are *simultaneous* concepts, not *chronological* concepts” (Haubold, 44–45).¹⁰

Walcott’s simultaneity, I suspect, is a complex blend of independence and inspiration, celebration and ambivalence, homage and challenge, all in one. Both the title of *Omeros* and its form attest to this mixture. The title derives from the *modern* Greek spelling of Homer’s name and the verse form

imitates not Homer's "great hexameters" but Dante's rhyming stanza pattern, the *terza rime* used in the *Divine Comedy*. Numerous essays in GrGr discuss *Omeros*' title but none its rhyming stanzas. Both need to be taken as a common gesture, the two poetic giants from the classical and Christian traditions set afloat in the mighty Atlantic and carried westward by the trade winds as many European émigrés before them. To paraphrase from "Sea Grapes," Dante's stanzas will "finish up as Caribbean surf" and Homer, now in colored skin, will come ashore on the beaches of St. Lucia where "the dugouts set out with ebony captains" (*Omeros* 2.2, p. 13).¹¹ In Walcott's hands, these Old World travelers and the white man's heritage will never be the same again. The most obvious metamorphosis is what happens to the name *Omeros*. On St. Lucia, it is both Greek—"O-meros," she laughed. "That's what we call him in Greek" (2.3, p. 14)—and the musical patterns of the Caribbean surf calling:

. . . O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbed.
(2.3, p. 14)

In *Omeros*, Walcott "reopens the wounds of history," to quote Lorna Hardwick's felicitous phrase (65)—a return to Africa where the hero's ancestors don't recognize him, to the American West where we witness the brutal subjection of the native American to the white man's progress, and to the struggles on St. Lucia herself between Achille and Hector over the island beauty. But, unlike "Sea Grapes," in *Omeros* characters on St. Lucia can transcend history, literature, and its long-transmitted aesthetics. See what happens to St. Lucia's Helen:

There, in her head of ebony,
there was no real need for the historian's
remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow,
swinging her plastic sandals on that beach alone,
as fresh as the sea-wind? Why make the smoke a door?
(54.2, p. 271)

or how Caribbean sunlight transforms the passion of Christ
or Rome's burden of empire:

but I saw no shadow underline my being;
I could see through my own palm with every crease
and every line transparent since I was seeing

the light of St. Lucia at last through her own eyes,
her blindness, her inward vision as revealing
as his, because a closing darkness brightens love,

and I felt every wound pass. I saw the healing
thorns of dry cactus drop to the dirt, and the grove
where the sibyl swayed. I thought of all my travelling.
(56.2, p. 282)

By the end of the poem characters in *Omeros* may achieve transparency, but Davis also reminds us that for the lyric poet Aimé Césaire (born on Martinique) and for Walcott himself (born on St. Lucia), the poet's personal struggle "to reunite with his local, insular audience" is more difficult. For both world-traveled poets, "the prolonged journey of deferred homecoming becomes . . . a basic trope for the vagaries of reception, and, no less significantly, for the authors' necessary rearticulation of the disparate cultural horizons that threaten to separate the returning artist from his native community" (193).

Even closer to Homer than *Omeros* is Christopher Logue's *War Music* (ongoing, 1981 to the present). Logue variously calls his poem an account, a free adaptation, and even on occasion a translation of the *Iliad*, but it also, in my view, is only

tangentially linked to Homer's poem. This distance has little to do with *War Music's* many obvious anachronisms and references to familiar household objects like Venetian blinds, or its numerous allusions to film technique. Long before Logue, Homer scholars saw how cinematic and visual Homeric description is. Logue's distance from Homer ironically is that he renders the *Iliad* almost exclusively as a war poem. When responding to the organizers of the conference on which GrGr is based, Logue declined to attend the conference but "asked us to throw open the question of what *War Music* is: 'What you might do for me is to ask "What is *War Music*?" Sometimes I don't feel at all sure'" (Greenwood, 159).

Emily Greenwood understands Logue's question to arise from the poem's "manifold intertextuality with other poems, and from its narrative promiscuity" (159) as oral-aural poem, written text, drama, moving picture, still photograph, and music. To the question "Is it Homer?" Greenwood says yes to the extent that "Logue's poem often intersects not just with Homer, but also with many of the concerns of Homeric scholarship in the present day. At the same time, Logue's remote rendition of Homer reminds us that many of Homer's contemporary readers and audiences read and know Homer in far-flung versions, such as filmic adaptations or the genre of fantasy fiction and that these versions are an inalienable part of what Homer has become in the twenty-first century," giving us a poem whose reach "—like a television—makes distance myth" (175). When Gary Wills asks the same question in his introduction to *War Music* (version published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1977 and reprinted by the University of Chicago Press in 2003), he also says yes, thinking less, however, of genre adaptation than of Logue's word texture, imagery, and musicality: "Great poetry," says Wills, "but is it Homer? Yes—all the way down, in deepening gyres, to the *Iliad's* inmost core" (xix).¹²

But *does War Music* reach down to the *Iliad's* inmost core? I think not, primarily because Logue renders the mor-

tal females mute, turning *War Music* almost exclusively into a male poem, devoid of its poignant countervailing voices. In Logue's Homer, Andromache becomes "the she." In Logue's retelling of book 19, Briseis' lone speech in the *Iliad* is cut—an elegiac lament over the corpse of Patroclus as she thinks of her marriage to Achilles that would have been (19.287–300).¹³ Logue's Achilles only has eyes for Patroclus: "I do not care about [Agamemnon's] gifts. I do not care, Odysseus, / Do not care. / Patroclus was my life's sole love" (212). In *War Music* eroticism is reserved for the intimacy of battle. So we find lines like: "As the Greeks eased back the Trojans. / They stood close; / Closer; thigh in thigh; mask twisted over iron mask / Like kissing" (154); "They stroke our ships, / Fondle their slim black necks, and split them, yes—" (147); "In her mind's eye / Andromache can see her husband's spear / Entering Patroclus' stomach" (165). In such passages, Logue captures a phenomenon in the *Iliad* rarely noted—when men fighting to the death address their mortal opponents in language traditionally associated with the bedroom.¹⁴ This is another example where modern liberties capture something in the original that more conventional translations often miss.

But, unlike Homer, Logue's battle eroticism does not resonate with male and female images of domestic intimacy or with a world at peace. The voices of Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen are gone from Logue's Homer; the passages he has selected from the *Iliad* do not include book 22, but if he were to have translated Hector's great soliloquy prior to facing Achilles, there is nothing in *War Music* to suggest that he would have accounted for Hector's final thought of a young man and a maiden gently cooing together in a secluded corner the way young men and young maidens do. In retelling book 18, Logue leaves out any account of Achilles' shield with its life-renewing scenes of communities at peace, including portraits of young men and maidens dancing to the delight of the joyous community. And yet Logue isn't alone in making Homer's female characters nearly invisible. Chap-

man's Arguments prefacing books 22 and 24, for example, offer not a word about the parts Hecuba, Andromache, or Helen play in those books, as if the war story were complete without them. But as the title suggests, the *Iliad* is the story of Ilios, and I personally find it hard to believe that this poem would have gained its stature in Western literature without these mortal women as part of the story. Sophocles seems to have sensed this when in the *Ajax* he highlights Ajax's vision of nobility by juxtaposing it with Tecmessa's great rebuttal, each of his characters paraphrasing Andromache's and Hector's speeches from *Iliad* book 6. Professors frequently ask undergraduates to imagine what the *Iliad* would be like without the gods; a more revealing question would be to ask them to imagine the war poem without Andromache, Hecuba, Helen, or Briseis. Logue's Homer begins to give us an answer, showing just how much of Homer is lost without them.

In his essay focusing on Homeric similes, Oliver Taplin does an excellent job discussing Michael Longley's transformation of epic into lyric and his "time-tensions [which] bridge Homer with the present" (187) (analogous to Walcott's simultaneity, Auden's thematic updatings, and Logue's temporal foreshortenings). Taplin makes the good case that "The Campfires" from *The Ghost Orchid* (1995) is among the best of Longley's Homeric reworkings. Here it is in full:

All night crackling campfires boosted their morale
As they dozed in no man's land and the killing fields.
(There are balmy nights—not a breath, constellations
Resplendent in the sky around a dazzling moon—
When a clearance high in the atmosphere unveils
The boundlessness of space, and all the stars are out
Lighting up hilltops, glens, headlands, vantage
Points like Tonakeera and Alleran where the tide
Turns into Killary, where salmon run from the sea,
Where the shepherd smiles on his luminous townland.
That many campfires sparkled in front of Ilium
Between the river and the ships, a thousand fires,

Round each one fifty men relaxing in the firelight.)
 Shuffling next to the chariots, munching shiny oats
 And barley, their horses waited for the sunrise.¹⁵

Except for lines 8–10 (“Points . . . townland”), this fifteen-line “sonnet” is close to a line-for-line translation of *Iliad* 8.553–65. Phrases like “no man’s land” and “killing fields” transport the ancient story into a contemporary setting of modern, mechanized warfare; other phrases like “the boundlessness of space” and “lighting up” also draw from modern idiom. Comparison to Pope’s famous translation of this passage shows the timeliness of Longley’s language even as he renders Homer’s lines closely.¹⁶ But it is not this bridging of time that transforms epic into lyric. The genre shift happens in the simile within the simile, lines 8–10. Here Longley pictures not Homer’s landscape but his own, a beloved headland on a remote coastline in Northern Ireland where he remembers shepherds smiling and salmon running from the sea, far from the crackling campfires of modern war. In this remarkable economy, remembrance turns from somebody else’s story of war to his own, transforming epic’s timeless and public narrative to one both personal and intimate. With these liberties, Longley disrupts our reading of epic, the familiar now unfamiliar, illuminating what Homer’s ancient voice does and does not evoke.

3.

GRGR IS INTERESTED in the influence of scholarship on translations and re-imaginings of Homer in fiction and art. Such influence is hardly peculiar to the twentieth century but already evident from the first Englished Homer when Chapman’s understanding of Homer and choice of words were significantly shaped by the allegorizing commentary and Latin translations accompanying the text he used, that by Johannes Spondanus (Jean de Sponde), Basel, 1583. In modern times this figure is Milman Parry, with his pioneering theories about orality and illiterate improvisers. Too fre-

quently in GrGr discussion of Homeric orality turns to genre reception and crossovers with far too little consideration of language, theme, and style in performance. Advocating for a “non-parochial understanding of the term epic” especially in the context of the living oral traditions, from sub-Saharan Africa for example, Barbara Graziosi writes: “In this vast and multiform world of epic poetry, Homer seems smaller and, in important respects, deficient: we cannot hear the sound of his lyre. Apart from defamiliarizing early Greek epic, the wider world of epic poetry helps classicists to focus on the fact that the very term ‘epic’ is not indigenous to Homer” (130–31). These observations would be more meaningful if they engaged in a substantive manner with the *Sunjata*, sometimes called an epic and still performed in various Mandekan languages. They would also benefit from discussion of what is meant by “epic”; for Graziosi it seems to mean “traditional oral narrative.” This may in the end be the most catholic of definitions but the point needs to be argued in regard to definitions of the genre which identify length, scale, meter, and “high style” as integral components. More useful are Graziosi’s comments, again more political and cultural than literary, about Milovan Vojičić’s *Song of Milman Parry* performed for Parry in 1933. Graziosi interestingly discusses the propagandistic rhetoric of the song when the extemporaneous bard, using the occasion to stir feelings of solidarity and nationalism, refers to the newly formed Yugoslavia as “our heroic fatherland” (line 24). It succeeded, almost fifty years later, in rousing the competitive juices in the Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare. After Kadare met Albert Lord briefly in 1979 and heard of this song, he began to write a correction, first in Albanian, then in a French revised text, *Le Dossier H* (1989), itself modified in another French version (1996) that was translated into English as the *The File of H* (1997). Not the work of an extemporaneous or illiterate poet, this piece is a sophisticated prose writer’s spoof—in the novel a Serbian monk leads the American astray by smashing tapes of Al-

banian epic—and also a challenge to scholars when it proclaims Albania, not Serbia or Yugoslavia, as the place of choice to study models of Homeric composition.

4.

CITING JOHN FOLEY, A. F. Garvie, and Alfred Heubeck, among others, Johannes Haubold leads us gracefully through the question of Homer's "dual citizenship in the republic of letters and that of oral epic" (44). For more than half a century Homeric studies have been suspended upon the tenterhooks of orality and writing. As Haubold writes in this volume: "For Parry, literary history started once the 'living' tradition of epic had ended, though he was ambivalent about Homer's place in that scheme . . . Scholars after Parry were fascinated by this ambiguity" (46). For Richard Martin fascination stems from Homer as oral poet. He writes of John Millington Synge's unstated use of Homer when heroizing the men and women of Aran in *The Aran Islands* (1907) as a prelude to his comments on George Derwent Thomson, Professor of Greek at the National University of Ireland, Galway, before acquiring the same title at Birmingham University (1937–70). Martin draws our attention to Thomson's understanding of the Homeridai from an Irish model: as Irish bards were dispersed throughout the countryside at the breakup of the Gaelic order though their heirs met in "schools" for over a hundred years, so, Thomson writes, "[the Homeric epics] could not have been produced either by a single artist or by a succession of artists working separately for their own ends. They were the work of a school in which generations of disciplined and devoted masters and pupils had given their lives to perfecting their inheritance" (89).¹⁷ Following this lead, Martin calls on Homerists to search out "new and precise comparisons between other multigenerational performance traditions and Homeric song-making traditions considered in diachronic perspective" (89).

But one might just as well look to Douglas Young, who

used Celtic models to demonstrate an opposite paradigm, namely that a single illiterate oral singer could compose fixed texts and commit them to memory.¹⁸ Or one could cite Graziosi when she refers to Robert Fowler's search for an oral poet comparable to Homer in subtlety and sophistication, an approach which raises the following concern: "If we ask what criteria are used to establish that equality, we quickly return to notions of great literature which ultimately stem from a study of the relationship between Greek and Roman epic" (123). Too often in this search for *comparanda*, reception-hunters ironically turn their attention away from Homeric artistry and the Homeric poems get overshadowed.

The texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we have them today show a poet in full command of his medium at almost all levels of composition, from the formula, to the line, to the scene, and ever outward to the broad shaping of the songs themselves. At the level of formulae, the paint strokes that eventually make the painting, Homeric usage is exceptional and often different from one poem to the next, just as Hesiod's manipulation of formulae and shaping of lines differ from Homer's. As Rainer Friedrich has demonstrated recently, Homer frequently violates Lord's principle of formula economy, often to great rhetorical effect.¹⁹ A number of scholars assume that the invention of writing must account for this verbal sophistication and complexity, although after these many years we are no closer to deciding whether writing did in fact play a role in composition or *how* it could have helped a singer compose poems of such scale and design as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

It has been over seventy years since Parry wrote his Master's thesis and over fifty years since Lord published *The Singer of Tales*, yet after all this time no two Homer scholars seem able to agree on just what a formula is. The number of dissertations on Homer, like the stock market, has dipped significantly in recent years. Under the influence of Parry's guslar analogues, examining Homer through filters of al-

most every color and hue, students all too often read articles on theory and statistics first and a close study of Homer's phrasing second. These filters have revealed many attributes of Homer's art but the increasing refinement and qualification of such studies eventually bring diminishing returns. It is very difficult to lift these filters from our reading of Homer; in GrGr one still very much feels their presence. Valuable as they have been, it is time to lay Parryite filters aside and to start reading the poems afresh.

We have moved beyond the Parryite belief that the individual contribution of any one singer, no matter how gifted, was minimal. Most now agree that there is such a thing as formulaic artistry and that an oral poet can reflect upon his craft and improve a song with each performance, and even between performances. If questions of single or multiple authorship and written or oral composition remain unsettled, we can still feel confident reading Homer as an artful text. In tribute to the new century and Homer's place in the global arena, may the next Homeric conference examine how the many twentieth-century translators of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from around the world have adopted Homer as their own and refashioned in their ways the many delights of Homeric artistry.

NOTES

1. In a 1995 talk, Walcott mentions the *Odyssey* as offering at least two permanent emblems. One is The Most Beautiful Woman in the World, Helen; the other, "The Moving Sail, alone on the ocean, not a ship but something small on a large expanse of water, trying to get somewhere—the image of the wanderer (call him Odysseus) made emblematic by the great poet." See "Reflections on Omeros" in *The Poetics of Derek Walcott: Intertextual Perspectives* (*The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96.2), G. Davis, ed. (Durham, NC 1997), 235 (quoted in GrGr, 208).

2. Compare Picasso: "Repeatedly I am asked to explain how any painting evolved. To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived in other times, is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was. Art does not evolve by itself, the ideas of people change and with them their

mode of expression" ("Picasso Speaks," *The Arts*, May, 1923; repr. in Alfred Barr, *Picasso* [New York 1946], 270–71). I thank Michael Silk for this reference.

3. Allardyce Nicoll, ed., *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad* (Princeton 1956; repr. 1998).

4. For a view of the shield as life-sustaining and antithetical to Achilles, see Oliver Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the *Iliad*," *G&R* 27 (1980), 1–21. See also Walter Marg, *Homer über die Dichtung*, second ed. (Münster 1971) and Andrew Becker, *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* (Landam, MD 1995), 150. For a contrary view, see my "Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight," *HSCP* 101 (2003), 29–47.

5. Compare David Ricks writing on views of Homer during the Greek civil war (1946–1949): "Greeks writing after the horrors of the 1940s drew so much on the darker side of the epics. In seeking in the wake of civil war to enter the republic of letters presided over by Homer, Greek writers did indeed find smoke and ashes—but I hope it will be agreed that they found more than that" (GrGr, 244).

6. Alexander Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, Maynard Mack, ed. (London and New Haven 1967).

7. In my comments below, I shall not consider each essay in its entirety, nor shall I discuss three of the essays: Françoise Létoublon's discussion of *katabasis* and the recurrent presence of shadows and ghosts in Theo Angelopoulos' postwar films *Ulysses' Gaze* and *Eternity and a Day*; David Ricks' "Homer in the Greek Civil War (1946–1949)," which elegantly shows how in war-torn Greece poets approached Homer from a distance ("I learned my Homer in Albania," one of them says), or sought to distance themselves and their times of crisis from Homer; and Seth Schein's "An American Homer for the Twentieth Century," which rightly questions the ahistorical and theme-driven approach to teaching Homer in American "Great Books" curricula.

8. *Pace* Goldhill, only the middle name of Ulysses Everett McGill is dactylic.

9. For others, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* might seem a better choice.

10. Quoted from Walcott's 1995 talk (note 1).

11. Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York 1990).

12. Different as the two approaches are, Wills would agree with Greenwood, I suspect, when she says, "Logue has done the community of Homer's readers a service in forcing discussion about the violence that is undeniably a feature of the *Iliad* . . . [though] obfuscated and sanitized by this text's status as a classic of world literature" (148, n. 10).

13. In keeping with his focus on Achilles' brutality, there is no place in Logue's Homer for Achilles' god-fed power. Logue also leaves out Zeus' instruction that Achilles be fed ambrosia and there is no hint that his arms lift him up as wings.

14. For this crossover of terms in Homer, see my "Eros and Warfare in Virgil's 'Aeneid' and Homer's 'Iliad,'" in Philip Thibodeau and Harry

Haskell, eds., *Being There Together: Essays in Honor of Michael C. J. Putnam* (Afton, MN 2003), 181–97, esp. 184–92.

15. “The Campfires” from *The Ghost Orchid* by Michael Longley, published by Jonathan Cape and Wake Forest University Press. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd and Wake Forest University Press.

16. Pope begins the simile as follows (8.687–89; Homer 8.555–56):

As when the Moon, refulgent Lamp of Night!
O'er Heav'ns clear Azure spreads her sacred Light,
When not a Breath disturbs the deep Serene.

In a note at line 687, Pope writes: “This Comparison is inferior to none in *Homer*. It is the most beautiful Nightpiece that can be found in Poetry. He presents you with a Prospect of the Heavens, the Seas, and the Earth: The Stars shine, the Air is serene, the World enlighten'd, and the Moon mounted in Glory.” Here is an instance where a translator sees a beauty in the original and exceeds it.

17. Quoted from *Marxism and Poetry* (London 1945), 34.

18. Douglas Young, “Never Blotted a Line? Formula and Premeditation in Homer and Hesiod,” *Arion* first series 6.3 (Autumn 1967), 279–324, esp. 295–97.

19. Rainer Friedrich, *Formular Economy in Homer: The Poetics of the Breaches* (Stuttgart 2007), though there is no need to follow Friedrich in thinking such control of Homer's medium necessarily implies a transitional phase toward post-oral composition with the aid of writing.