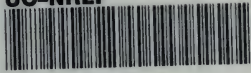


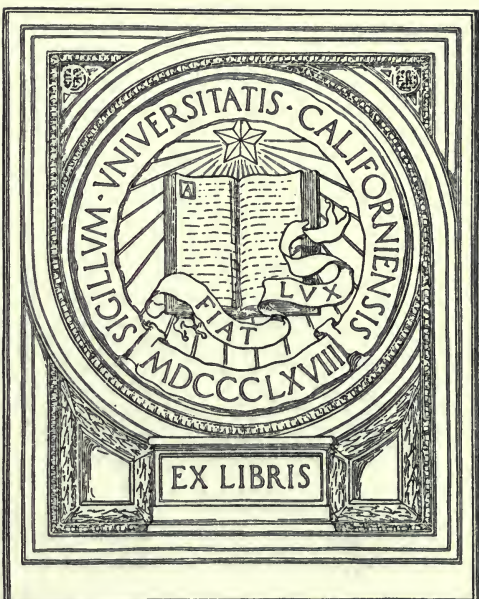
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HOMER
AN ADDRESS DELIVERED ON BEHALF
OF THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY
BY J. W. MACKAIL

HAMMERSMITH PUBLISHING SOCIETY
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THE NAME OF HOMER MEETS US
before the threshold of history, as one of those which for five-and-twenty centuries have dominated the world. The two great Homeric poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, influenced Greek life and letters, and through them the life and letters of the whole world after Greece, to a degree that is quite without parallel. Yet themselves they hardly belong to Greece. As a fine scholar has said of them, they stand in strange isolation, like an island near a continent. Nothing that preceded them has survived, and after them there is a chasm in our records; on the nearer as well as on the farther side of that island we come to sheer cliff and sundering waters. And the island is peopled by a race of its own: with affinities to the Greeks, yet not Greek; with a life larger, wider, more varied and more universal than any which has elsewhere been imagined or recorded. It is to these two poems, and to the life which they embody, that I desire to call your attention this evening; saying just so much about both, in the narrow limits at our disposal, as may I hope excite you to learn more.

The Iliad & Odyssey took the form in which they have come down to us among a Greek colony in Ionia, on the western coast of Asia

Minor which faces the islands and the Greek middle sea, about 800 years before the birth of Christ. When or how they were originally composed, or through what changes they passed before they reached their consummate form, is unknown; the history on which they were based was supposed to have happened at least two centuries earlier than this, and in between there had come one of those great revolutions in human affairs which obliterate the ancient landmarks, the invasion and conquest of Greece by the Greeks. In some way or another, no doubt, generations of poets may have gone to their making. As it has been well said that the nameless architect of Westminster Abbey was not this man or that, but the people of South-Eastern England, so the maker of the Iliad and Odyssey was not merely a poet, or even a guild of poets, but a whole nation. But this vast work finally took shape in the hands of one or two great poets.

It is uncertain whether, as they stand now, both poems in substance represent the work of the same author. The Greeks themselves differed much in opinion as to this. The best modern critics find traces in the Iliad and Odyssey not only of different original sources but of different final hands; they think that

the Odyssey was composed a generation, or perhaps two generations, after the Iliad. But both poems deal with the same sort of life, the life of what is called the heroic age; the life of a race earlier than that of the Greeks among whom the poems were made, and differing not only from them but from all actual men in being nearer the Gods by descent, and having still traces of divine origin. Both are written in the same admirably rapid, majestic, and melodious verse; both take places in the first rank of poems by virtue of their length; for we may say roughly that, other things being equal, a long poem is a greater achievement than a short one; the Iliad is 15,000 lines long, the Odyssey 12,000.

It may be well to say here, and one can never be too careful to remember, that the life portrayed in these poems, both in broad outlines and in smaller details, is such as the poet imagined, not necessarily such as he saw. It is the more important to keep this in mind, because archaeology at present encroaches somewhat on the field of other studies, and there is a fashion of valuing early poetry not so much for itself as for the facts which it incidentally preserves; thus many students look in Homer chiefly for traces of savage customs and pre-

historic usages, which may be compared with those of other prehistoric peoples, or of savage tribes of the present day. There is no reason why this should not be done; it is an innocent study; but poetry, like all art, is chiefly valuable for its own sake, and the better the poetry is, the greater its value becomes as poetry, and the less does it serve the purpose of a record of facts. Of Homer it must be borne in mind from first to last that he is essentially unhistorical. He shows us what sort of life could then be imagined by a poet. It becomes a question for us when we read Homer whether we can clearly imagine a life better than the Homeric life, or even in some ways so good. Whether there ever was any actual human life really so simple, beautiful and noble as the life represented in the Iliad and Odyssey we cannot tell, because we have no means of knowing; but we have no grounds for believing that there was. It certainly was not so in any period of which we have trustworthy knowledge. But the excellence that ancient Greek life had—for in some respects ancient Greek life holds up an unapproached ideal to us even now—was in no small part due to their possessing Homer as their chief poet, and keeping the Homeric ideal always closely before their imagination.

It is a common saying that Homer was the Greek Bible. Children were told stories out of the Iliad and Odyssey as soon as they could understand stories; boys learned reading out of them at school; whole cities used to gather to hear parts of them publicly recited by a sacred class or caste of Homerids, as they were called,—an organized body of men, who, by one of the fictions dear to mankind, traced a sort of apostolic succession from the poet himself. Appeals to the authority of Homer were constantly made by historians or orators to establish some fact or support some argument. The most eminent of Athenian poets, Sophocles, used to say that his own tragedies were fragments from the great Homeric banquet. Homer directly influenced and moulded all Greek literature, and through it, all Latin literature; and on Greek and Latin literature almost the whole of modern culture is founded. Yet with all this vast diffused influence, Homer has not, like many influences which once were great, spent himself and become lost in his own results. We may still approach that island with the wondering eyes of the first navigators. Homer remains still as fresh and as enchanting as he was to his first hearers: the more so perhaps, that we have wandered farther away than they had from what

is called the freshness of the early world. Perhaps, I say, the more so; for it is not an easy question how much ought to be allowed for this. Was the early world really fresher than ours? Have we not still the same sights to see which an ancient Greek poet was content to have seen before he died? 'Him I call most happy,' he says, 'who having looked on these august things, the common sun, the stars, water, clouds, fire, goes quickly back to the place whence he came.'

The common sun, the stars, water, clouds, fire: these things remain. There is this great difference, no doubt; that we have, with immense labour, surrounded ourselves with things which take away our attention from these, or which absolutely prevent us from seeing them at all. Uncommon is rather the epithet that modern civilization has suggested for the sun. The stars make no part of our life at all. Of fire and water we have made dull, tamed slaves. Only in clouds, perhaps, we could show that Greek poet something that would astonish him. It makes a difference, too, that we live here in England, in a land which together with its sky and sea is perhaps less beautiful than that Ionia where the Iliad and Odyssey were written. But we must guard against the illusion of distance. No

age or country was ever intrinsically poetical in itself. We may almost say that all ages are in themselves equally poetical or unpoetical: poetry, the poetic ideal, is but a borrowed light upon men's actual life, a visionary gleam, as Wordsworth says, a light that never was on sea or land. To idealize life thus, to see inwardly, and to express in word, or tone, or colour, the beauty below and beyond things which is essential and unchangeable, this is the function of art, & notably of the art of poetry. The author of the Iliad and the author of the Odyssey was, in each case, one of the great artists of the world. The Greeks called Homer simply 'the poet'; that described him to them sufficiently without any further epithet; and to us now it is still Homer the poet that really matters. Even now, if our sight is clear enough, we may see the common actions of life proceeding as Homer describes them. It has been well said that he does not even describe sailors pulling down their boat into the sea without making a picture in the great style. But a modern American poet of the last century, and he hardly in the first rank of poets, could describe such things as a steam ferry or the building of a hotel so as to make pictures in the great style. This, however, is too wide a subject to enter on here.

Now let us look at Homer's world in some of its broader outlines; to fill in this slight sketch you must read the Iliad & Odyssey themselves. For people who cannot read them in the Greek, there are two ways of doing this, to read them in an accurate prose translation, or in the poetical version which you find gives you the most pleasure. Each way has its advantages. There are a number of prose translations, all pretty much alike. Of poetic versions, Chapman's & Pope's Iliad, & Worsley's & Morris' Odyssey, each in different ways, reach a high level of merit, & by comparing them one may perhaps get some notion of what Homer is really like. But no translation in prose or verse can reproduce the exquisite Greek language, a material which, for fineness and beauty, stands to all other languages as a precious stone does to pebbles or bits of glass.

First, then, of the world itself as the Homeric poems imagine it.

1. The earth on which men live is flattish and circular, like a plate turned over on its face. Round the rim goes a great stream of water, called Oceanus, the Swift-flowing: an imaginative amplification & unification of those tides and currents of the outer sea which were known by rumour to the early Mediterranean peoples.

It moves with a steady current, circling round in one direction and returning into itself. The inner seas open into it through straits & channels: the sun and stars sink into it when they set, and rise out of it again, bright from their bath in its waters. Beyond the Ocean-rim, dropping away into darkness, is an unknown and ghostly region, not lit by the sun. Below earth—under the inverted plate so to speak—is the House of Hades, where dead men are; it is shadowy and hardly real, like a dream: below that again is hell, Tartarus, where great sinners suffer torments. Great rivers of water and fire pour down into it through chasms at the edge of the world. Above earth, and resting on the rim of it all round as a dish-cover rests on a dish, is heaven, a solid concave roof or vault. Homer speaks of it sometimes as made of iron, or as plated with brass, but that is only a way of expressing its solidity & lustre, which are like those of polished metal. The heavenly bodies move along it. The sun, sinking into the Ocean-river at sunset, travels back all night under the earth, rising again out of the 'very lovely lake' on the eastern edge of the world behind Dawn, which is half personified as a maiden with rosy feet and yellow gown. In the *Odyssey*, when the companions of Odysseus,

being pressed hard with hunger on an island where they are storm-stayed, have killed and eaten the holy oxen of the Sun, the Sun-god makes complaint against them in heaven, and threatens that unless they are punished he will descend into the world underground, and shine among the dead in the House of Hades. The Gods live in Olympus. Sometimes Olympus is spoken of as a high mountain summit; sometimes as a great country up in the sky, spreading above the whole earth. From it, in either case, the Gods can look down and see all that is happening on earth; they often descend and mingle unknown among men, in the shape and fashion of men. One of the reasons why hospitality should always be freely given to strangers, is that men have often thus entertained Gods unawares. Or they can at their pleasure take the form of birds or beasts. The Goddess Athena in the *Odyssey* comes and goes in the shape of a sea-eagle. At the single combat between Ajax and Hector in the *Iliad*, she and Apollo sit on an oak tree looking on, in the shape of vultures. After death certain elect men and women of heroic descent go to an earthly Paradise, called the Elysian plain, beyond the sunset, 'where life is very easy: no snow is there, nor yet great storm, nor any rain, but Oceanus

always sends forth a whispering west-wind to breathe cool upon men.' Some of great wickedness go down to Tartarus and are tormented. But the most live a dull & shadowy life among the marsh-meadows of the House of Hades, dark and comfortless and disembodied.

2. Of the world within the ring-fence of the Ocean-river, Greece with the islands about it, and the western coast of Asia Minor, are known thoroughly; beyond these limits the world is but imperfectly known, chiefly by travellers' tales, and is peopled with strange things. To the north there are wild tribes, who roam on the great plains which stretch across Northern Europe and Central Asia, drinking the milk of mares, away beyond the mountain-chain of Thrace. To the south something is known of Egypt, with its magnificent capital, Thebes of the hundred gates, and its one great river; and of the Sidonians, who send their merchant-ships all over the seas trading in dyed cloth, all kinds of metal work, ivory, and precious stones. Far in the extreme ends of the earth to east and west (as we still speak of the East and West Indies) live the Aethiopians or Dark-faces, the most remote of men. On the northern coast of Africa live the lotus-eaters, and beyond them the pygmies or dwarfs (the same dwarfs who

are still to be found about the sources of the Congo), who make war with the cranes every year on their migration. Strange echoes of more fabulous lands come in the stories of the places to which Odysseus in the *Odyssey* travels—or says he has travelled, for that is not quite the same thing. The floating island of King Aeolus, who keeps the winds bound in his palace, is girt by a wall of bronze running sheer up from the sea. This is the poet's version of a volcanic island, such as Stromboli, with its sheer cliffs of metallic-looking basalt, and its coast fringed with fields of floating pumice-stone thrown out from its crater, round which thunder-clouds gather and tempests break forth. Telepylos, or High-gate, is the city of the Laestrygonians, a race of cannibal giants. In it 'the out-goings of the night & the day are near together': some rumour of the Arctic summer and the midsummer midnight Norway sun setting into sunrise had drifted down to the Greek coast; there, we are told, a man who needed no sleep might earn a double wage, one as an oxherd, and the other as a shepherd. In the island of Aea there lives in her palace in the thick oakwood a terrible enchantress, Circe, daughter of the Sun; & there, the poet says, is the land of sunrising, and the dwelling-place and dancing-ground of Dawn.

The land where Odysseus is to go on his last journey is so far from the sea that the people of it have never tasted salt, and will call the oar which he carries a winnowing fan. From the island of Circe he sails across the Ocean-river to visit another more terrible land ; ' a waste shore and the groves of Light-in-darkness, tall poplar trees, and willows that shed their fruit,' from which one may see the mouldering House of Hades, and the four streams of Hell, the river of shuddering, the river of wailing, the river of sighing, and the river of burning fire. Last of all he comes to the enchanted city of the Phaeacians, an earthly Paradise in a lonely sea, far from men or traffic, where there are magical ships that have no helms, nor oar or sail, but of their own selves know the will of their passengers, and carry them across the sea by night where they wish to go.

3. To return to the known world. Each people is ruled by a king, whose title is 'people-leader,' or in fuller phrase, 'shepherd of the people,' and 'protector of men.' He is leader in war, supreme judge, and president of the assembly of the people. He rules by divine hereditary right, but he may not disregard the Council of Elders, nor the assembly, which consists of all the freemen of the kingdom. If

the ruler judges crooked judgements in the assembly and enforces them by the high hand, and drives out Right, then, Homer says, 'God is wroth and pours forth rain in autumn, flooding the whole black earth with it, and all the rivers run full, and the torrents tear away the slopes and rush headlong from the hills down to the purple sea, roaring aloud, and the farms of men crumble away.'

4. The Gods love righteousness and hate iniquity. The dependence of men on a special heavenly Providence is matter of certain conviction. To live justly is the service which the Gods require; their favour surely follows when that service is paid, their vengeance as surely, though sometimes after a long interval, when it is neglected. 'All mankind need Gods,' says Pisistratus, son of Nestor, to his guest, who has brought an unknown stranger with him: 'give your friend the cup that he may make offering, for he too, I suppose, prays to the immortal Gods.' Simple piety is assumed as natural to all men. The stranger and the beggar are in the special protection of heaven; it is sacrilege to turn away from the gate any one who has asked hospitality. Individual Gods and Goddesses are very like magnified men & women; they have human failings, human

loves and hatreds, and even quarrel among one another. But alongside of this multitude of Gods, with their brilliant and restless life, is the steady notion of a single power called the Watching. To disregard this Watching is the height of folly and crime. Even pirates, we are told, when they have sacked a town, and sail away with their ships laden with plunder under the long trail of smoke from the burning houses, are in great fear of the Watching. Concurrent with the will of the Gods is a dark mysterious power called Fate or Doom, which spins the thread of each man's destiny at his birth unalterably, and other powers called the Erinyes or Avengers, which uphold right among Gods and men alike by punishing wrong doing.

5. What is perhaps most beautiful in the Homeric poems is the picture they give of social and domestic life. Rather than go into a tedious statement of the condition of the family in Homer, I will mention a few passages from the Iliad and Odyssey which bear upon it—though indeed there is hardly a page of either poem which does not bear upon it indirectly.

On the shield of Achilles, forged for him by the smith-god Hephaestus, are wrought representations of life in peace and war. In the city

of peace, 'a fair town of articulately speaking men,' there are espousals and marriage-feasts. Beneath the blaze of torches men are leading a bride from her father's house through the city, while the wedding-song rises loud; young men are dancing in a ring to the music of flutes and viols, and the women stand at their doors and look on in admiration. In another scene the young men and girls are dancing together, holding one another's hands at the wrist, the girls dressed in fine thin linen with their hair garlanded. Outside the city wall is portrayed a soft fresh ploughed field, with ploughmen driving their yokes to and fro: also the same field in harvest time, the harvesters reaping with sharp sickles and the binders binding the sheaves in twisted bands of straw. Behind under an oak the indoor servants are making ready supper, a roasted ox and barley bread, for the reapers, and the king, with a staff in his hand, stands on a furrow overlooking the work, in silent gladness. Also there is a vintage scene, with girls carrying the sweet grape-clusters in plaited baskets, a boy in the middle sitting and singing to a viol. Beyond the tilled land there are white sheep at pasture in a beautiful valley, and a farm steading, and thatched cottages, and sheepfolds.

Take again the scene where Telemachus in the Odyssey comes to the house of King Menelaus at Sparta. He and his friend Pisistratus have driven in their light chariot all day along the wheat-bearing plain till sunset. At dusk they reach the palace and drive straight into the courtyard. Menelaus is entertaining company to supper, and a servant comes in to ask him whether, as the house is already very full, the new arrivals shall be sent on somewhere else. The king is indignant at the very suggestion: 'We also have eaten the bread of many men in our wanderings,' he says; 'unyoke their horses and bring them in.' The strangers are at once brought in and made welcome. First they are given a warm bath; then they sit down to supper, Menelaus saying to them, 'Taste food and be glad, and after you have supped we will ask you what men you are.'

Still more remarkable is the whole description in the Odyssey of life in the city of the Phaeacians, and of the meeting of Odysseus and the Princess Nausicaa, one of the most perfect ladies in all poetry: so far as exquisite manners go, both in men and women, no advance has ever been made on this ideal Homeric world. For this you should read the whole story in the sixth and seventh books of the Odyssey.

Or, once more, I may quote two of the exquisite little pictures which are incidentally given in similes.

When the God Apollo, going in front of the Trojan army, dashes down the great earthen rampart of the Greek camp and fills in the ditch with it, making a bridgeway across it for the full width of a spear-cast, the action is described thus:

‘As when a little boy scatters the sand on the seashore, first making sand castles for sport in his childishness, and then again in play tumbling them down with his feet and hands, even so didst thou, O archer Apollo, overturn the long toil and labour of the Greeks.’

Again, in the same day's fighting, when the Greeks are being routed, and their champion Achilles remains wrathfully in his tent and will not go out to battle, his friend Patroclus comes to him ‘shedding tears like a well-head of dark water that pours its misty stream down a rock-precipice,’ to beseech him to help his countrymen. Then Homer goes on:

‘And noble fleet-foot Achilles when he saw him was grieved for his sake, and accosted him and spoke winged words, saying, Why weep you, Patroclus, like a baby girl that runs

by her mother's side and cries to be carried, pulling at her gown, and hindering her haste, and looks up at her tearfully till she is lifted?'

6. The arts in Homer's world are still at an early and simple stage. Weaving and spinning are done at home by the women of the family. Metal working is well advanced; iron is freely used, but only for rougher implements; either the ores worked were of poor quality or the smelting was imperfectly done: and so for objects which require a fine temper or a cutting edge it has not replaced bronze. Weapons and armour are all of bronze. Rooms in rich houses are lined with plates of hammered bronze, mixed with plates of blue enamel made from copper ore. Gold and silver are freely used for ornaments, and also, not stamped into coins, but weighed, for money. Common houses are built of wood; it is only those of important people that are of stone. Brick is not mentioned. The principal articles of food are bread (of wheat or barley), roast meat, and wine. Fish is only eaten when meat is scarce. Fruit is plentiful, apples, pears, figs, grapes, and pomegranates. Vegetables are not spoken of. Men's dress is a woollen shirt reaching to the knees, and over that a cloak or plaid. Women wear a long gown of wool or linen reaching to the feet and trailing

slightly on the ground behind, fastened by a girdle worn low down over the hips. On their head they wear, married and unmarried women alike, a coif with a veil attached which falls over the back and shoulders: they do not keep their faces covered like Orientals, but if they feel so disposed can bring the edges of the veil forward on both sides so as partly to screen their face. For fighting, the warrior has a helmet, breast-plate and back-plate, greaves, belt, and shield, all plated with bronze; he carries two long spears of ashwood with bronze heads, which are either thrown from a short distance or thrust with at close quarters, and a very short sword, rather like a heavy knife. In fighting also, as in hunting, bows and arrows are used, but the archer is counted an inferior sort of warrior. Though horses are trained, and the art of riding perfectly known, cavalry are not used in battle: the breed of horses was small & not strong enough to carry a fighting man with his heavy bronze armour any great distance: they fight either on foot or from light chariots drawn by a pair of horses yoked to a single shaft, sometimes with a third trace-horse alongside of them. The art of writing is not practised nor is any allusion made to it. This fact has been taken to prove that the Iliad & Odyssey

cannot have been written down till long after they were composed; it proves at all events that writing was no necessary art in such a life as was then imagined ideal or desirable. Men get their livelihood either by farming, or by trading with merchant-ships, or as artificers. The ruler has a domain of public land for his life use, and supports his household and retainers from it. Shipbuilding is a great art among them. Somewhat beneath the freeman who does his own work ranks the free hired labourer, who has a rather hard life unless he has a good master. Below these again is the class of slaves. Prisoners taken in war become slaves, and so do people who are kidnapped by pirates. But slaves are always conceived of as being kindly treated and attached to their masters. In fact there is in all this Homeric world no trace of any such thing as a strife between classes. Life is throughout carried on under the sanction of custom; and this custom, though liable to outbursts of savagery under the influence of great excitement, is mild and humane in its ordinary working. Justice & kindness bring the reward of ease and plenty; and increase of wealth to the rich is not wrung from the poor but makes them, too, richer.

And now to return to Homer as a poet.

The consent of all competent judges from the earliest recorded time to our own has placed the Homeric poems at the very head of all poetry. To the Greeks, as I have said already, Homer was simply 'the poet,' all epithets failing them in their desire to do him honour. Amongst the Latins, Lucretius speaks of him as holding the single sceptre in the train of the Muses; Virgil was called the Roman Homer as the highest praise that could be given him. Dante in his vision sees him leading the band of poets as their lord and sovereign. Milton would fain be equalled with him in renown. At the period when enthusiasm for poetry was most dead in England, Pope, in the preface to his celebrated translation, uses these remarkable words:

'It is to the strength of this amazing invention we are to attribute that unequalled fire and rapture which is so forcible in Homer, that no man of a true poetical spirit is master of himself while he reads him. What he writes is of the most animated nature imaginable: everything moves, everything lives, and is put in action. If a council be called, or a battle fought, you are not coldly informed of what was said or done, as from a third person; the reader is hurried out of himself by the force of the poet's imagination, and turns in one place

to a hearer, in another to a spectator. The course of his verses resembles that of the army he describes, "they pour along like a fire that sweeps the whole earth before it." Exact disposition, just thought, correct elocution, polished numbers, may have been found in a thousand; but this poetic fire in a very few. Even in works where all those are imperfect or neglected, this can overpower criticism, and make us admire even while we disapprove. Nay, where this appears, though attended with absurdities, it brightens all the rubbish about it till we see nothing but its own splendour. This fire is discerned in Virgil, but discerned as through a glass, reflected from Homer, more shining than fierce, but everywhere equal and constant; in Milton it glows like a furnace kept up to an uncommon ardour by the force of art; in Shakespeare it strikes before we are aware, like an accidental fire from heaven; but in Homer, and in him only, it burns everywhere clearly, and everywhere irresistibly.

'Homer not only appears the inventor of poetry, but excels all the inventors of other arts in this, that he has swallowed up the honour of those who succeeded him. What he has done admitted no increase; it only left room for contraction or regulation. He showed all the

stretch of fancy at once; and if he has failed in some of his flights, it was but because he attempted everything. A work of this kind seems like a mighty tree, which rises from the most vigorous seed, is improved with industry, flourishes, and produces the finest fruit: nature and art conspire to raise it: pleasure and profit join to make it valuable: and they who find the justest faults, have only said that a few branches, which run luxuriant through a richness of nature, might be lopped into form to give it a more regular appearance.'

This is how Pope speaks of the author of the Iliad. I should like to read, in confirmation of it, a passage from Pope's translation; only saying this beforehand, that while it gives a good notion of Homer's splendour, it fails to render his equally admirable simplicity and directness. The passage I have chosen is from the sixth book. Hector, the Trojan captain, has armed himself to go out to battle, but he first goes to find his wife Andromache, & bid what he forebodes (as indeed turns out to be the case) will be a last farewell to her & to his infant son.

At home he sought her, but he sought in vain:
She, with one maid of all her menial train,
Had thence retired; and with her second joy,

The young Astyanax, the hope of Troy,
Pensive she stood on Ilion's towery height;
Beheld the war, and sicken'd at the sight;
There her sad eyes in vain her lord explore,
Or weep the wounds her bleeding country bore.

But he who found not whom his soul desired,
Whose virtue charm'd him as her beauty fired,
Stood in the gates, and ask'd 'What way she bent
Her parting step? If to the fane she went,
Where late the mourning matrons made resort;
Or sought her sisters in the Trojan court?'
'Not to the court, (replied the attendant train),
Nor mix'd with matrons to Minerva's fane:
To Ilion's steepy tower she bent her way,
To mark the fortunes of the doubtful day.
Troy fled, she heard, before the Grecian sword;
She heard, and trembled for her absent lord.'

Hector, this heard, return'd without delay;
Swift through the town he trod his former way,
Through streets of palaces, and walks of state;
And met the mourner at the Scaean gate.
The nurse stood near, in whose embraces press'd
His only hope hung smiling at her breast,
Whom each soft charm and early grace adorn,
Fair as the new-born star that gilds the morn.
Silent the warrior smiled, and pleased resign'd
To tender passions all his mighty mind;
His beauteous princess cast a mournful look,

Hung on his hand, and then dejected spoke;
Her bosom labour'd with a boding sigh,
And the big tear stood trembling in her eye.

' Too daring prince! ah, whither dost thou run?
Ah, too forgetful of thy wife and son!
And think'st thou not how wretched we shall be,
A widow I, a helpless orphan he?
For sure such courage length of life denies,
And thou must fall, thy virtue's sacrifice.
Thou from this tower defend the important post;
There Agamemnon points his dreadful host.
Thrice our bold foes the fierce attack have given,
Or led by hopes, or dictated from heaven.
Let others in the field their arms employ,
But stay my Hector, here, and guard his Troy.'

The chief replied: 'That post shall be my care,
Not that alone, but all the works of war.
How would the sons of Troy, in arms renown'd,
And Troy's proud dames, whose garments sweep the
Attaint the lustre of my former name, [ground,
Should Hector basely quit the field of fame?
My early youth was bred to martial pains,
My soul impels me to the embattled plains;
Let me be foremost to defend the throne,
And guard my father's glories, and my own.

' Yet come it will, the day decreed by fates;
(How my heart trembles while my tongue relates!)
The day when thou, imperial Troy! must bend,

And see thy warriors fall, thy glories end.
And yet no dire presage so wounds my mind,
My mother's death, the ruin of my kind,
Not Priam's hoary hairs defiled with gore,
Not all my brothers gasping on the shore,
As thine, Andromache! Thy griefs I dread;
I see thee trembling, weeping, captive led,
In Argive looms our battles to design,
And woes, of which so large a part was thine:
To bear the victor's hard commands, or bring
The weight of waters from Hyperia's spring.
There while you groan beneath the load of life,
They cry, Behold the mighty Hector's wife!
Some haughty Greek, who lives thy tears to see,
Embitters all thy woes by naming me.
The thoughts of glory past, and present shame
A thousand griefs shall waken at the name.
May I lie cold before that dreadful day,
Press'd with a load of monumental clay!
Thy Hector, wrapt in everlasting sleep,
Shall neither hear thee sigh, nor see thee weep.'

Thus having spoke, the illustrious chief of Troy
Stretch'd his fond arms to clasp the lovely boy.
The babe clung crying to his nurse's breast,
Scared at the dazzling helm and nodding crest.
With secret pleasure each fond parent smiled,
And Hector hasted to relieve his child,
The glittering terrors from his brows unbound,

And placed the beaming helmet on the ground ;
Then kiss'd the child, and, lifting high in air,
Thus to the Gods preferr'd a father's prayer:

' O thou whose glory fills the ethereal throne,
And all ye deathless powers! protect my son!
Grant him, like me, to purchase just renown,
To guard the Trojans, to defend the crown,
Against his country's foes the war to wage,
And rise the Hector of the future age!
So when triumphant from successful toils
Of heroes slain he bears the reeking spoils,
Whole hosts may hail him with deserved acclaim,
And say, This chief transcends his father's fame:
While pleased amidst the general shouts of Troy,
His mother's conscious heart o'erflows with joy.'

He spoke, and fondly gazing on her charms,
Restored the pleasing burden to her arms;
Soft on her fragrant breast the babe she laid,
Hush'd to repose, and with a smile survey'd.
The troubled pleasure soon chastised by fear,
She mingled with a smile a tender tear.

The soften'd chief with kind compassion view'd
And dried the falling drops, and thus pursued:

' Andromache! my soul's far better part,
Why with untimely sorrows heaves thy heart?
No hostile hand can antedate my doom,
Till fate condemns me to the silent tomb.
Fix'd is the term to all the race of earth;

And such the hard condition of our birth:
No force can then resist, no flight can save,
All sink alike, the fearful and the brave.'

A passage from another verse translation of the *Odyssey* in a more modern manner may follow, to give some idea of what is as remarkable in Homer as his elevation and splendour, and what Pope, & the eighteenth century generally, did not quite fully appreciate. This other quality is his delicate and romantic beauty.

In the *Odyssey*, Telemachus, the only son of Odysseus and Penelope, who has just grown up to manhood, has by the advice of the Goddess Athena, sailed to the mainland to seek news of his long-lost father. Odysseus has been so long gone that nearly every one believes him dead; and the palace is full of young princes who have come to make suit to Penelope, and who live at free quarters in her house. Telemachus took his journey in secret, concealing it even from his mother, that he might not vex her; when it becomes known that he is gone, she is in the utmost distress, and the suitors are furious. Hitherto they had neglected him, as merely a boy; now they realize that he is a man, and that they must make an end of him or he will make an end of them.

They fill a ship with armed men, and send it to lie in the channel by which he must sail home, intending to capture and kill him. Meanwhile Penelope prays to Athena, who comforts her in a dream in the likeness of her sister Iphthime.

But in the upper chamber wretchedly
Fasting from food lay wise Penelope,
And meat and drink she touched not, musing deep
Whether the prince her son from death might flee,

Or be laid low and not return again
From the proud suitors' hands: and even as when
A lion full of fear uneasily
Broods in his heart amid the throng of men,
When round his lair the circling toils have swept;
Such deep debate within her heart she kept:
Till slumber overcame her, and her limbs
Were loosened, and she sank adown and slept.

But now the grey-eyed Goddess taking thought
Another counsel yet devised and sought;
And fashioned forth a phantom, in the shape
And bodily semblance of Iphthime wrought,

Icarius' child, that prince of high renown,
Wife of Eumelus, who in Pherae town
Abode; and to divine Odysseus' house
Upon Penelope she sent it down,

To stay her from her sighs and tears she shed,
Weeping and wailing and uncomforted;
And through the keyhole of the door it passed
Into her bower and stood above her head;

And in these words its voice to her was borne:
'You sleep, Penelope, your heart forlorn
Within you: yet the Gods who live in bliss
Forbid you longer to lament and mourn.'

'For yet your child returning you shall see,
Since not a sinner in God's sight is he.'
Then, slumbering softly in the gates of dreams,
Spake and made answer wise Penelope:

'Wherefore, O sister, are you come this day
Hither, a strange and unfamiliar way?
For far and far apart from us you dwell.
And now you bid me my distress allay

'And all the many pangs wherein are tossed
My heart and soul, who first of all have lost
My husband lion-hearted, who of old
Was excellent among the Danaan host

'In all achievement; and like him was none
Through Hellas and mid-Argos fame that won.
And now once more upon a hollow ship
Is gone from me my own beloved son;

'A child, that of men's words and deeds may know
But little: wherefore greater is my woe
For him than for that other, and for him
I fear and tremble lest to harm he go,

'At sea, or at a stranger people's hand,
Where he has journeyed: for against him stand,
Devising evil, many men who long
To slay him, ere he reach his native land.'

But answering spake to her the phantom dim:
'Take courage, nor be much afraid for him:
So great the Guide is that beside him goes,
Whom men in peril of their life and limb

'Have prayed full often by their side to stand;
Pallas Athena of the mighty hand.
And you she pities mourning: wherefore now
To tell you this I come at her command.'

Then spake and answered wise Penelope:
'Now tell me, if a God indeed you be,
Or a God's voice have heard, concerning him,
That man ill-fated, whether haply he

'Yet lives and looks upon the light of day,
Or down to the Dark House has gone his way.'
But answering spake to her the phantom dim:
'Hereof no answer plain return I may,

'Whether in truth he be alive or dead:
Words are but wind, and often best unsaid.'
So saying, through the keyhole of the door
Into a breath of wind it vanished.

Then woke Icarius' daughter, and upright
Started from sleep, and all her heart was light
Within, because a dream so clear had come
Upon her in the darkness of the night.

Now let us take another passage, one of the battle pieces in the Iliad, and translate it literally, in order to get some idea of Homer's simplicity, some idea how vivid & rapid and direct he is. This passage shows us too, how, even out of the cruelty and carnage of war, he brings something that uplifts the heart & fills it with no barbarous delight, but only with steadfast courage and a great pity. It is the story of the fighting by the ships in which the Lycian captain Sarpedon is slain by the Greek Patroclus. Zeus longs to save him, but cannot oppose Fate.

'But Patroclus followed, calling the Greeks fiercely on, and counselling ill against the Trojans, who broke, and filled all the ways with din and rout, and on high a whirlwind of dust was scattered up to the clouds, as the hooped horses galloped back towards the city, away

from the ships and huts. But even where Patroclus saw the press thickest, thither he drove on, shouting, while men fell prone from their chariots under the axle-trees and cars were flung upside down; and straight over the trench in forward career leapt the swift deathless horses. Now when Sarpedon saw his unbelted comrades fallen under the hands of Patroclus son of Menoetius, he cried aloud in upbraiding to his godlike Lycians:

‘Shame, O Lycians! Whither do you flee? Now be strong, for I will face this man, and know who it is that conquers us: truly much harm has he dealt to the Trojans, loosening the knees of many men and good.

‘He spoke, and leapt in his armour to ground out of the chariot. But Patroclus on the other side, when he saw him, sprang from his; and they, like vultures with crooked talons and curved beaks that fight with loud screams on some great cliff, rushed with a shout against each other. But looking on them the son of Cronus the Counsellor had pity, and said to Hera his wedded sister:

‘Woe is me for fate, that Sarpedon, the best-beloved of men, must go down before Patroclus son of Menoetius. My heart in my breast is divided in sundering purpose, whether I shall

snatch him yet alive out of the tearful battle & set him in the fat land of Lycia, or whether I shall now subdue him under the hands of the son of Menoetius.

'Thereat answered him the great-eyed Lady Hera:

'Most dread son of Cronus, what word is this you have spoken? will you ransom from sad-sounding death this man that is mortal & long destined to doom? Do so: but all we other Gods praise it not. This too I tell you: consider it; if you send Sarpedon home alive, bethink you lest then another God also may wish to save a son of his own likewise out of the violent battle; for many children of the Immortals fight round Priam's great city: so will you stir fierce anger among us. But if he is dear to you and your heart is pitiful, then suffer him indeed to fall in the strong battle beneath the hands of Patroclus son of Menoetius, but when breath and life have left him, send Death & unawakening Sleep to carry him till they reach the land of wide Lycia, where his kith and kin will bury him, with a mound and pillar, as is the due of the dead.

'So she spoke, and the father of Gods & men disregarded her not: but he shed a drizzle of blood upon earth, honouring his dear son, whom

Patroclus was about to slay in fruitful Troy
far from his native land.

‘So when they advanced and closed, there
Patroclus struck noble Thrasymelus, the good
squire of prince Sarpedon, low down on the
belly, and loosened his limbs. And Sarpedon in
his turn threw & missed him with his shining
spear, but wounded his horse Pegasus on the
right shoulder, who screamed as he breathed
out his life, and fell moaning in the dust, and
his spirit fled away. But the other two horses
reared asunder, and the yoke creaked and the
reins fell in a heap on them, as the trace-horse
lay in the dust. Yet Automedon the good spear-
man found a remedy: drawing the keen-edged
sword where it hung by his stout thigh he
sprang out & cut the horse loose, not fumbling
about it; so the pair righted themselves and
straightened out the traces, and the chiefs met
again in the fatal strife.

‘Then Sarpedon missed again with his shin-
ing spear; the point flew over the left shoulder
of Patroclus and struck him not: but Patroclus
in turn darted the bronze, and the cast flew not
vainly from his hand, but struck, just where
the midriff clasps the beating heart; & he fell,
as falls an oak or a silver poplar or a tall pine,
that shipwrights on the hills fell with whetted

axes to be ship-timber: even so he lay along in front of chariot and horses, moaning aloud and clutching at the bloody dust. Even as when a lion has sprung upon a herd & killed a flame-coloured bull, high of courage among the swaying oxen, and under the lion's claws he groans and dies, so under Patroclus the captain of the shielded Lycians writhed in death and called aloud to his comrade:

‘Dear Glaucus, warrior among men, now is good need that you be a spearman and brave in battle: now let baleful war be your desire, if you are swift of your hands. Fight for me with bronze; for henceforward and all your days I shall be a shame and reproach to you, if the Greeks strip me of my armour when I am fallen in battle at the ships. Stand strongly, and hearten all the people.

‘So as he spoke the end of death covered his eyes.’

One more passage, even more famous than any of these, I may give. It is from the last book of the Iliad. When Hector, the prop of Troy, has been slain by Achilles and dragged at his chariot wheels, his corpse lies unburied in the Greek camp. But the Gods take pity at this, and send Hermes to conduct King Priam into the Greek lines by night. Under this super-

natural guidance he passes unseen through the Greek sentinels, the gates of the entrenchment unbar and open of themselves before him, and he comes to the tent of Achilles and begs his son's body. Achilles relents so far as to give him the body, and before daybreak he again passes unseen out of the camp, still under the guidance of Hermes.

'But when they came to the ford of the fair-flowing river, then Hermes passed away to wide heaven, and yellow Dawn began to spread over all the land. So with wail and moan they drove the horses to the city, & the mules drew the dead man. And no one knew them, man or fair-girdled woman, until Cassandra, beautiful as the golden daughter of the Foam, climbed upon the fortress-tower & was aware of her own father as he stood in the chariot, and the herald with him, the crier to the town. Then she saw him who lay on the bier behind the mules, and thereat she wailed and cried aloud through all the city,

'Come hither, men and women of Troy, and look upon Hector, if ever while he yet lived you rejoiced when he came back out of battle; for great rejoicing was he to the city & all the folk.

'So she spoke; and not a man or woman was left in the city, for sorrow beyond bearing over-

came them all; and near the gates they met Priam bringing home the dead. Foremost his own wife and the Queen his mother cast themselves on the wheeled carriage and rent their hair, and touched his head; & round them stood the multitude weeping. And all day long till sunset would they have wept & wailed for Hector without the gates, had not the old man from his chariot spoken among the people,

‘Give place for the mules to pass through: hereafter you shall have your fill of lamentation, when I have brought him home.

‘So he spoke, and they stood apart and gave place for the waggon. And they, when they had brought him to the glorious house, laid him on a carved bed, & set by him singers to lead the dirge; & they dirged him with a song of lamentation, and the women made moan after them. And among the women white-armed Andromache led the lamentation, holding between her hands the head of Hector slayer of men.

‘Husband, you are perished young out of life, and leave me a widow in your house, and the child is yet but a little one, the child of ill-fated parents, you and me; nor, I think, will he grow to manhood, for first shall this city be sacked utterly, since you are perished, its watcher, who guarded it and kept its careful wives and little

babies. Soon shall they be borne in hollow ships, and I myself with them; & you, O child, shall either go with me to a place where you must labour at mean work, toiling before the face of an unmerciful lord, or else some Greek will grasp you by the wrist and fling you from the battlements, a grievous death, in his wrath because Hector slew his brother or father or son; since many and many a Greek under Hector's hands has bitten earth's measureless floor; for no light hand had your father in the bitter fight; therefore the people lament him amid the city. Woeful wailing and grief have you left to your parents, O Hector, but the bitterest sorrow shall remain with me; because neither did you stretch your hand to me from the deathbed, nor say to me one precious word that I might have remembered while my tears kept falling, through all the nights and days.

'So she spoke, weeping, & the women wailed after her. And again among them Hecuba led the loud lamentation.

'Hector, far the dearest to mine heart of all my children, surely while yet alive you were dear to the Gods, & even in the doom of death they have cared for you. Other sons of mine fleet-footed Achilles took captive & sold across the unharvested sea to Samos or Imbros, or

cloud-capt Lemnos; but you he slew with the long-edged bronze & dragged round & round the tomb of his comrade, even Patroclus whom you slew; howbeit not so did he raise him up again. Yet now dewy and fresh you lie in hall, like him whom silver-shafted Apollo has touched and slain with his soft arrows.

‘So she spoke, weeping, and stirred up the unending lamentation.’

And here one might fancy that the last word had been spoken. But there is just one more: there is still a further depth to sound in awe & pity. The grief of the wife, the grief of the mother, over the dead warrior is piercing indeed, yet such as is poured forth over many men. We should hardly remember Hector as we do if he had been only a good son and a kind husband: it is not that, beautiful as that is, which has made his name imperishable. The war of Troy was kindled by the beauty of Helen; it was for her sake that all those heroes fought and fell. Her beauty blinded the whole people; they cursed her & yet could not bear to give her up. Hector himself (he was not a very clever man) had no illusions about her; he had always condemned his brother Paris for carrying her away; ‘a sore mischief she is,’ he tells him once to his face, ‘to our father and the city and all

the realm.' But to Helen herself he had never spoken an unkind word. I go on with the Homer.

'And then third among them Helen led the lamentation.

'Hector, far the dearest to mine heart of all my brothers; since godlike Alexandros, my lord, brought me to Troy—would to God I had died first! this is now the twentieth year since I came thence and departed from my own land; but from you I never heard an ill word or a harsh: nay, if another ever taunted me in the palace, whether brother of yours or sister or goodly-gowned sister-in-law, or your mother—but your father was ever kind to me as if he were my own—then would you silence and soothe such an one with words, with your gentle-heartedness and with your gentle words: therefore I weep for you and my miserable self together, in bitterness of heart; for there is not one other left in all wide Troy to be kind or dear to me, but they all abhor me.'

Hector is not the hero of the Iliad, at least in the sense of being the principal figure in it, or the one upon whom all the action hinges. But this is the sort of thing that makes us understand why later ages regarded him with a feeling hardly short of worship.

‘So she spoke, weeping; and the infinite people moaned after her. But the aged Priam spoke and said to the people,

‘Bring wood now, O Trojans, into the city, and have no fear of a crafty ambush of the Greeks; for Achilles sent me away from the black ships with this message, that he will do us no harm till the twelfth dawn shine.

‘Thus he spoke: and they yoked oxen and mules to waggons, and quickly gathered before the city. Nine days they carried an endless store of wood, but when the tenth dawn shone and lightened upon men, then they carried forth brave Hector, shedding tears, and laid the dead man on the top of the pile, and set fire to it.

‘But when the Lady of Morning, rose-footed Dawn, shone forth, then the people gathered round glorious Hector’s pyre; and first with flame-coloured wine they quenched all the burning, as far as the strength of the fire had gone, and then his brothers and comrades gathered his white bones, lamenting, and the big tear trickled down their cheeks. And these they took and laid in a golden coffer wrapt in soft crimson cloths, & straightway laid the coffer in a hollow grave and piled above it a great store of large stones, and heaped the mound

quickly, with watchers set all about, lest the mail-clad Greeks might attack before the time. But when they had heaped the mound they went back and gathered together as is fit, and feasted the feast of honour in the palace of Priam, the god-fostered King.

‘So these held funeral for Hector the knight.’

This is the end of the Iliad. Noble & simple as Homer is always, he excels himself here in the way he finishes his story. The poet Cowper, who translated Homer, says in a note at the end of his translation, ‘I cannot take my leave of this noble poem without expressing how much I am struck with this plain conclusion of it. It is like the exit of a great man out of company whom he has entertained magnificently, neither pompous nor familiar; not contemptuous, yet without much ceremony. I recollect nothing among the works of mere man that exemplifies so strongly the true style of great antiquity.’

Let us think then for a moment and try to express in precise words what Homer has to do with us, what his value for us is. Our concern, everywhere and at every moment, is with the life in us and around us, the power and the will to live it well. All life lives upon ideals,

strives by the very law of its nature towards an unattained good. What we most urgently need, here and now, for ourselves and for the society to which we belong, is to keep an ideal of life, lived nobly and simply, perpetually burning before us like a fire. Now among the ideals of a noble and simple life that set before us in Homer is one of the highest that have ever been conceived by man.

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