TIPS FOR READING HOMER'S POETRY

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I'm not sure I have much faith in what I've agreed to do here: give advice on how to read Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Actually, in my heart of hearts I think: Do it any way that suits you, as long as you do it. But occasionally I've had the experience of telling people how to do things, such as advising our undergraduate seniors on their essay writing, and they've listened and done it, and even said they were the better for it. Those are triumphant moments for a teacher. So I'll barge ahead and give some tips that might help.

We call these two huge poems, and others that explicitly follow them, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *epics*. The *Odyssey* begins with the words *Andra moi ennepe, mousa.* I'll translate it this way: "The man—put him into words (*ennepe*) for me, O Muse, …" The man is Odysseus. Homer is preparing to speak of a man as a whole. The *Iliad*, in contrast, begins with the words: *Menin aeide, thea*… "The anger—sing Goddess…" He asks the goddess to sing of a passion, the anger that possesses Achilles, to sing of a man, to be sure, but one not quite there. Homer asks the muse to put words in him to tell of Odysseus, a man of great virtuosity (*polytropos*); he asks the divinity, also a muse, I think, to sing of Achilles' soul-corroding wrath. For both poems, Homer appeals to one of the nine Olympian divinities, the Muses, each of whom is in charge of one of the arts. The one who supervises epic is called Calliope, but Homer does not name her in his invocations. He asks her to *speak* to him, to put words in him: *en[n]epe*. So epic, *epos* in Greek, is rightly named; the Muse gives the poet *words*. Note: this poet does not believe he is being creative; he thinks he needs to hear and to listen: Poetry comes *from* him only because it came *to* him.

We might ask a number of comparing questions: Why must Achilles' anger be rendered as a *song* while Odysseus' humanity is told in *speech*? Why is the heavenly singer called a goddess and heavenly speaker a muse? Why does Homer ask the muse to speak *to him* about Odysseus but doesn't mention himself in his prayer about Achilles' anger? But once again I'm going where I don't want to be: into comparison. Comparative Literature is the very last thing I want to draw you into, because it should, in fact, come, if at all, *last* when each work has been read and reread and lived in as a world in itself. Premature comparison of works, or worse, whole "literatures" gives you mostly empty abstractions, skeleton stories without the flesh of particularity.

Instead I want to say a word about the genre term *epic,* literally, what pertains to *epos*, the word. To be sure, we know from the *Odyssey* itself that palaces had a resident bard, a so-called rhapsode, which means a "stitcher-together of song"—their names were Demodocus, Phemius, and even Odysseus himself. They intoned the lines without script and accompanied themselves on the lyre. But at some point these song-medleys became written works and eventually ceased to be musical performances, becoming instead reading experiences, words altogether.

I have a strong opinion about this process supported by sensible reasons but nothing like proof. With this opinion goes my first piece of advice, a tip. Whoever Homer was (we do not definitely know), think of him as the redactor, the composer and overseer of the last oral composition as it went into the written mode. So, if you like, think of him as the first literary poet, the first to have supervised a version using the recently introduced alphabet, a version which is said to have been prepared in Athens. This man—in the nineteenth century Samuel Butler propagated the kooky notion that it was a woman, namely Princess Nausikaa of the phantasy-land Phaeacia, called "Scheria," the "Cut-off Land"—this Homer, the first and greatest

of all poets, assisted his own hyper-acute memory with writing, that artificial external memory, and together with the keenest knowledge of humanity and the subtlest art of expression composed probably old lays into surely timeless epics. Here is what follows for us, his latest readers, my tip: Be kept continually off-kilter by the recognition that you're missing a lot. It's a little like starving yourself in expectation of a feast; you become sharp-set, hungry for discoveries. At the same time it's absolutely unnecessary to look up every unknown term or to recall every name. The ghost of a memory is enough to alert you if a thing or person suddenly acquires a new significance. In a word: acutely attentive reading is not stodgily pedantic trudging. So as not to be talking vacuously, let me give examples of micro-artistry. I mean small but wonderful detail, such as is present by the score in Homer's poems.

In the ninth book of the *Iliad,* Odysseus, the great diplomat among the Greeks, is sent by his king and commander, Agamemnon, on an embassy to Achilles, who sits sulking in his tent, nursing his wrath against this king who has taken away his prize of battle, a woman Achilles has grown fond of. His absence from the battle against the Trojans endangers the whole Greek expedition. Odysseus is instructed to bring him back into the fight by means of a list of gifts of restitution, and Agamemnon's oath that he has never slept with Achilles' girl. This message Odysseus pretty much repeats: "I will swear an oath," he recites, "that I never went up into her bed or had intercourse with her as is usual...." The king's message went: "as is usual among men and women." But Odysseus stops and adds both a word, and, I think, a bow. He says: "as is usual, *my lord*, among men and women." It is a grace note, which to miss deprives the reader of a pleasure. But noticing it requires some oral memory of what was said a hundred and forty-two lines earlier. So my tip here amounts to this: Have faith in Homer's artistry and you'll be more apt not to miss it, since it's everywhere.

I said that I added the courteous inclination of the small, short-legged diplomat. Homer, incidentally, leaves hints of his favorite's, Odysseus', looks all over; he says, for instance, that he appears larger sitting down than standing up. I meant to convey that I visualized the scene.

The ancient report was, as we've all heard, that Homer was blind. No one knows whether the final artist of the epics was in fact sightless, but if he was, it wasn't from birth and, if he wasn't, it was a clever fabrication. For these poems are one long incitement to visualization, such as we can imagine takes place in the imagination of a man who, undistracted by casual gawking, sees what he is intoning to himself more intensely. Blind Milton, who wrote the only epic I know of that can vie with Homer's, corroborates the claim, since *Paradise Lost* is full of terrific spectacles. In fact the Homeric epics at times require the listener, be it an audience at an oral recital or a solitary reader, to see what Homer doesn't explicitly say. I'll give you the most spectacular example I know of, in all my reading.

It is the climactic day of the *Iliad*, in the twenty-second book. Hector has killed Achilles' friend Patroclus. This is a great passionate friendship, not erotic but that much the more fervent. Now Achilles is chasing his friend's killer around the citadel of Troy. Hector, the crown prince of Ilium, whose name means the "prop" or "stay" of Troy, turns around and falls. Achilles stands over him and sees him not face-to-face but concealed by his face-covering armor. This is the armor Hector had taken from dead Patroclus. But it is not Patroclus' own armor either. It is Achilles' armor that he had given to Patroclus, who had begged to enter the battle as Achilles' surrogate. (Recall that Achilles has angrily withdrawn from the war and refused even Odysseus' diplomatic peace-making.) Now Achilles is about to drive his spear into Hector's jugular. What is he looking at? He sees Patroclus in armor and behind Patroclus he sees himself. Homer does not say a word; he has barely reminded us of what Hector is wearing sometime earlier. When

Achilles thrusts he kills both his friend and himself—for his mother has told him that he will die in the war he himself is now bringing to an end.

Here's the tip: Always visualize, and the action will become more poignant.

And then turn your attention back to words, which will corroborate the vision: Five books earlier, when the news of Patroclus' death was first brought to him, Achilles had cried out, using a phrase that has a double meaning in Greek: "Him have I lost," but also "Him have I killed"—a truth, if we recall that Achilles has allowed Patroclys to go forth to battle in Achilles' armor, a tender man falsely emboldened and exposed beyond his warrior-abilities.

To be sure, translators don't notice or can't convey this double meaning, this example of Homer's verbal ingenuity. So the tip here would have to be: "Learn Greek." It is not an altogether silly notion, when we consider to what not so profitable discretionary activities we do in fact devote our free time.

Just as in order to get the most out of the poems that are full of sights, it helps to *see* what isn't *said*, so to get the most out of poems that are essentially made of words, it helps to *hear* what isn't said. Here's a fine example, which my favorite translator, the poet Robert Fitzgerald, does catch. It is from the *Odyssey*.

Penelope, the queenly wife, has been waiting for her husband's return from Troy for twenty years, keeping together their much exploited estate and bringing up their much endangered boy Telemachus.

Let me interrupt myself here to point to another aspect of Homer's tale that deserves attention: names. We don't know how bound he was by his oral tradition ("Hector," for instance, was probably inherited), but my guess is that some of the name-felicities are his own. Thus Odysseus' son, a shy boy whom he left in Ithaca as an infant, is called Telemachus, which means

"Far-from-Battle," while Achilles' fierce son, whom he left at home in Pthia, is called Neoptolemus, "New-to-War," which indeed he is when he comes to Troy after his father's death. And while I'm at it, Pthia has in it the sound of a verb that means dying. Achilles, full of wrath at the insult Agamemnon has put on him, has threatened to go home, to his "deathland." When he stabs the image of himself in the throat he is in fact going to his death.

The reading tip is: Be aware that beneath your notice the poem is boiling away with intimations. That is, as I've suggested before, the root of a good reader's virtues: alertness.

To get back to Penelope and listening for unspoken words. When you come to discuss the *Odyssey*, one lovely question might be: At what point does Penelope recognize the wrinkled beggar as the husband she has been waiting for over two decades, while stringing along by a strategem the suitors for her hand who have been besieging the palace. She tells them that when she has finished weaving the funeral cloth, the shroud for her retired father-in-law, Odysseus' father Laertes, she'll be ready to make a choice. So by day she weaves, and what she adds by day she undoes at night, thereby, I think we are to imagine, postponing Laertes' death indefinitely.

So Odysseus turns up, worn and wrinkled. It is part of his nature to undergo sudden transformations of appearance. I think of him as maybe forty-five or fifty (past middle age in Mediterranean climes) though sometimes he blooms into lusty youth. She hears his voice in her halls before she sees him. Then begins what I think of as a canny game between them: He pretends to be a vagabond but an old friend of her husband. She pretends that he is a news-bringing guest. When does she recognize him? I say, when she hears his voice, even before she sees him: How wouldn't she? They are, forever and always, the archetypal husband and wife, equal and coordinated. For example, he always speaks of her, his consort, in royal, kingly—not queenly—similes.

But in case you think it's not a cautious, cunning game, here's what happens, to prove it: She invites him to a private conference in the evening—very unusual—and orders the old nurse of the house, Euryclea, to wash his feet, as is the hospitable custom. Here is what she says to the servant:

> But come, get up now, circumspect Euryclea,
> And wash your lord's—age-mate's feet.

The end of the line—she has forgotten herself for a brief moment, and is about to make a slip—was clearly to be "wash your lord's feet." She quickly recovers and substitutes "age-mate's." A moment later the foot clatters into the basin as his old nurse recognizes an old scar on his leg. Penelope doesn't notice—Athena has turned her mind away. Athena is the divinity of the quick mind; Penelope is again self-possessed, deliberately absent-minded. For everything depends on their common discretion, guarding the secrecy of his return.

The tip here is: Be alert to quick twists away from the expected. Homer knows what he is doing.

Now my next-to-last heads-up: Homer is the most subtle psychologist you'll ever read, partly because he's not impeded by psychological type-jargon. The royal couple between them, with the aid of their son, now a young man, and a couple of faithful servants, have utterly defeated, in a blood-bath, the hundreds of suitors infesting the palace. But they have not yet had a moment of recognition. Penelope, whose very life is faithfulness, is strangely withheld, reluctant. She imposes a test. What actually *is* the test? Homer does not say overtly. She tells Odysseus that she has cut loose their marriage bed which was literally rooted in a once-live olive tree. When he hears this, Odysseus, the unflappable, loses it, as we would say: he goes ballistic. And that, Homer intimates, is for Penelope the completely satisfactory passing of the test—the spontaneous emotional acknowledgement that his marriage has not lost its hold on him. Together

they go to bed, where he tells her all his adventures with witches and demi-goddesses. In effect, he is the poet of his own poem. And in this candid telling, mostly of female encounters, he wisely leaves out one: the youngest woman, the Phaeacian princess who shyly fell in love with him. This man knows what's what.

The reading tip: As always, watch for what isn't said, but, above all, expect in Homeric epic a sophistication concerning the human soul as it was and is, and I hope ever will be, beyond what you're used to in contemporary novels.

Now finally, the poetic figure that particularly distinguishes Homeric poetry, the simile. Here's my favorite, from the *Iliad*, eighth book. An otherwise undistinguished young Trojan is shot to death by an arrow in the chest. Homer says:

> And like a poppy he let fall his head to one side, a poppy that is in a garden
> Laden with fruit and the showers of spring,
> So he bowed to one side his head made heavy with helmet.

Formally a simile is a comparison of similars—here "as a poppy, so the head." Homer likes to put the imagined comparison first and that matters.

Reading tip: I've talked about the importance of visualizing Homeric scenes. Similes require a *double visualization*. So, *first* see the poppy, blowy red flower, stem buckled just below the petals by the weight of the fruit capsule and rain drops. Then lay over that, as a transparency, the picture of a young warrior, his head bent over his slim dead body by his heavy helmet. Hold both together and ask yourself: What is Homer doing with this dual vision? Is it a message of despair—human violence outdoing nature? Or is it one of comfort—war as part of, and partaking of, nature? It will be a wonderful conversation. The gist of my tip is: Take similes as incitements to seeing double and thinking that out.

As you can imagine, this isn't the half of it. I could talk about Homer's significant use of locations, of his artfully intimating use of the dactylic hexameter line, of his cleverly intricate handling of timelines, and on the grandest scale, of the very precise contrasts and comparisons between his two antithetical heroes, short-lived, swift-footed, blazing Achilles and long-lived, versatile, undercover Odysseus and their own poems. Instead I'll let you go and read them.

Thank you for listening.