I INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND PROBLEMS

1. History, myth, poetry

EPIC
I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel—
'Here is the march along these iron stones'
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
He said: I made the *Iliad* from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.[1]

Patrick Kavanagh's short poem confronts the reader with a number of questions which will preoccupy us in this survey. The Homeric poems show us a world which in many respects seems primitive and remote; even if the expedition of the Greeks against Troy really happened, even if it took place on the scale which the *Iliad* asserts, and lasted the full ten-year span, it would still be 'a local row' compared with later historical conflicts, ancient or modern. Can the bad-tempered disputes of warrior chiefs, the violent revenge of a savage and undisciplined soldier, the lies and posturing of a vagabond rogue, still move or excite an audience today? It will be necessary to show here some of the ways in which Homer gives the conflict at Troy, and the homecoming of Odysseus, a timeless importance, so that these mere episodes in the vanished heroic age – long past even for the poet and his audience – become microcosmic images of human life. The vast subject of Homer's influence upon later western literature cannot be even

[1] Kavanagh 1964: 136.

superficially addressed here; but occasional comparisons and illustrations may help to show how much subsequent poets and artists have found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to enlighten and inspire their own work.

'I made the *Iliad* from such / a local row.' But what was the local row about, and where and when did it happen? The Greeks always assumed that the war was an authentic historical event, and modern faith in this was strengthened by the landmark excavations in mainland Greece and at Troy by the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann and his many successors. On the one hand, a glorious civilization had existed in Greece in times far earlier than the classical age; on the other, a city with mighty walls had existed near the Hellespont, had been rebuilt many times, and at some stage had been destroyed by fire. Supporting evidence seemed to appear in Hittite documents, which mentioned a people called the Ahhijawa, a name which could be an earlier or foreign form of 'Achaeans'; and there were other possible correspondences – most intriguingly, evidence of a monarch ruling in 'Wilusa' (Ilium) who bore a name transmitted in documents as Alaksandu, which strongly resembles 'Alexandros', the alternative name for the Trojan Paris. It was tempting to suppose that the legends were substantially true, that a great force of Greek invaders attacked and sacked the city now called 'Troy VIIA', and that some time later the fall of the Mycenaean civilization brought an end to this prosperous era; later mythology saw this in terms of an age of heroes followed by subsequent decline. The discovery that 'Linear B', the language of the Mycenaean age, was in fact an earlier form of Greek, made it possible to hypothesize a continuous tradition of poetic narrative, which preserved a record of these great days through the Dark Ages.[2]

Bold and imaginative reconstruction has continued, with the advance of archaeological and linguistic research. A picture emerges of large-scale conflicts between Mediterranean communities and the societies dominating the eastern seaboard in the late second millennium.[3] Yet caution is still in order. If there was a continuous tradition

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[2] Page 1959 provided a learned and highly readable discussion of the earlier progress of these debates, but is now seriously out of date. For an authoritative account see Latacz 2004 (translated from a 2002 German work; it should be noted that subsequent German editions include updating). The annual journal *Studia Troica* publishes the results of the ongoing excavations at the site of Troy. See also the brief overview in M. L. West 2011b: 97–112.

[3] See especially the collection of essays edited by Foxhall and Davies 1984; also Mellink 1986; Kirk 1990: 36–50. For a penetrating essay which combines archaeological and literary finesse, see

from Mycenaean times, we cannot assume that the tradition was free of distortion or misunderstanding (for instance, those who do not dismiss the Wooden Horse as pure fiction sometimes suppose it to be a confused echo of an Oriental siege engine). Some features of the tradition are, in any case, implausible: the thousand ships, the ten years spent far from home are surely epic exaggeration; nor can even the most romantic of readers suppress doubts about a national campaign fought to recover one leader's wife. Overseas raids and adventures are a familiar part of the epic repertoire and probably of the real-life background, as many passages in the *Odyssey* suggest. In the *Iliad*, Nestor recounts his own exploits as a young man in a cattle-raiding expedition against the people of Elis (11.670–762): as has often been suggested, this may well give a more accurate idea of the scale of warfare in early Greece than the vast assemblage of peoples listed in the Catalogue of Ships.[4] At all events, even if some general account survived from Mycenaean times, it is hardly likely that any details of the course of events were preserved.[5]

Whatever the historical facts behind the *Iliad*, they are separated from the epic itself by a gap of at least four hundred years (the traditional date for the fall of Troy was 1183 BC, and archaeologists currently place the destruction of Troy VIIA not far from that date).[6] The *Odyssey*, being a tale about an individual's fortunes and an island community of little prominence in Mediterranean history, is still less likely to preserve much in the way of historical reality. A great deal of the *Odyssey*, in any case, is set in a world of magic and monsters, remote from authentic history or geography. The poems do contain elements of an older tradition: the wealth of Agamemnon, lord of Mycenae 'rich in gold', Ajax's tower-like shield, and Odysseus' boar's-tusk helmet are examples. Sometimes these memories are blurred or conflated with later conventions: for the most part the warriors carry two thrusting-spears, but the single heavy spear, a Mycenaean weapon, is

Sherratt 1990. A very different approach is adopted by Fehling 1991, who seeks to recover the original core of the *story*, dismissing historicity.

[4] On Nestor's narrative, see Bölte 1934; Hainsworth 1993: 296–8. Frame 2010 is a 600-page monograph on Nestor.

[5] Much historical information is painlessly presented in Morris and Powell 1997 (esp. Bennet 1997 on the Bronze Age; Morris 1997 on the Iron Age is less rewarding).

[6] 1183 is the date accepted by Eratosthenes and Apollodorus, but many other dates were canvassed; it is certainly hard to see how any could have been supported by proof. Burkert 1995 discusses ancient dating-systems and the theories about the Trojan war, concluding that none of the dates suggested has any historical basis.

occasionally recalled, in some passages to arouse awe and a sense of latent power (see *Il.* 16.140–4). Certain verbal phrases and formulae also clearly have a long history, and it has been argued that many of these go back to Mycenaean times or even beyond: this would imply a long and continuous tradition of poetry on heroic themes.[7]

Later ancient criticism assumed that the Greek epics preserved historical tradition, but it was always recognized that the poet had enhanced or embroidered what he inherited: Herodotus remarked that Homer in the story of the abduction of Helen had selected from various versions one which seemed more appropriate to epic storytelling (2.116.1, referring to the *Cypria*), and Thucydides commented that it was natural for a poet to exaggerate the importance of the events he described (1.10). Much has been made of the distinctions between different types of story, such as 'saga', which is conceived as more realistic, though concerned with heroic combat, and 'folk tale', an elusive term often applied to more fantastic or magical narratives; definitions are difficult, and the relation of both terms to 'myth' is unclear.[8] In general it would seem that both Homeric poems include folk-tale or magical elements, but the *Iliad*, with its military theme and firm geographical setting, is more like saga, while the *Odyssey*, especially in its first half, is closer to folk tale.[9] But any strong contrast of this kind swiftly breaks down on closer analysis: the *Iliad* includes a cap of invisibility, a talking horse, a warrior who fights with a river god, and a body magically preserved against decay; the *Odyssey*, in its own way, shows us more of social and domestic 'realities' than the more sombre and dignified *Iliad* will admit. Moreover, the presence of the Olympian gods in both poems, but more prominently in the *Iliad*, makes Homer a peculiarly special case: these colourful and potent figures, intervening freely in mortal affairs for good or ill, seem to belong to neither saga nor folk tale, but transcend such categories.

[7] On the cultural amalgam, see Kirk 1962: 179–92; on inherited diction, M. L. West 1988 (earlier Page 1959, ch. 6). On religion, see M. P. Nilsson 1932; Burkert 1985, ch. 1 (but p. 46 offers a warning: 'Startling correspondences with the later Greek [religious] evidence stand side by side with things totally unintelligible. Greek religion is rooted in the Minoan–Mycenaean age and yet not to be equated with it.')

[8] R. Carpenter 1946; Kirk 1970, 1974; Bremmer 1994: 55–7; Hansen 1997, 2002, esp. introduction (10–12 on problems of definition).

[9] Woodhouse 1930; Calhoun 1939; Page 1973a; Hölscher 1989. Csapo 2005 is a sophisticated account of definitions and theories of 'myth', including discussion of folk-tale theory as expounded by Vladimir Propp and adapted by many classical scholars (e.g. Burkert 1979): see e.g. Csapo 2005: 57–67 on the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* and parallel versions.

Comparative studies have shown that, even when narrative poetry of a heroic type deals with events closer in time than the Trojan War, and better documented, startling distortions may be introduced.[10] The Song of Roland recounts an episode in the campaigns of Charlemagne, and a Latin chronicler records the death of 'Hruodlandus' (i.e. Roland) in battle in 778; but the battle in question, an attack by Basques, was of no historical importance. In the heroic style, the poet turns it into a huge conflict between Christian and Infidel, and Roland is slain by a mighty Saracen; the whole poem embodies the spirit of the twelfth-century Crusades.[11] Similar transformations and intermingling of history and imagination can be found in other traditions: the *Nibelungenlied*, for example, or the Serbian epics.[12] The Norse Saga of the Volsungs moves from pure myth – the tale of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, rich in magic and close to the world of the Norse gods – into a more historical era, with Atli (Attila the Hun) in conflict with the Burgundian Gunnar (Gundaharius); the legends here have connections with those in the *Nibelungenlied*. But even here the saga is demonstrably remote from history, and combines characters who could never have met. Obviously, the fact that modern historians can identify errors does not prove that historical accuracy is impossible in heroic epic. It has been suggested that the broader background may often be more accurate (though less precisely described) than the central incidents;[13] but the probable limitations of this kind of evidence need to be recognized. It may be that the Homeric epics tell us more about the attitudes and outlook of the Ionians of the eighth or seventh century BC than about the actions of the Mycenaeans of the twelfth.

The bards of Homer's age and earlier were concerned to preserve the *klea andrōn*, the 'glorious deeds of men'; it would seem that they believed these men to have existed in time long past, but recognized that they could not guarantee every detail of their accounts. Homer invokes the Muses in terms which admit his dependence on tradition and inspiration: 'you are goddesses, you are present, you know all; we only hear the glorious tale, and have no knowledge' (*Il.* 2.485–6). We may doubt whether Homer had authority in earlier poetry for

[10] Vansina 1965, 1985; Henige 1974. For outstanding applications to archaic and classical Greece, see Thomas 1989, esp. chs. 1–2; also O. Murray 2001.
[11] Bowra 1957: 520, 530–7; cf. Finley et al. 1964; Hainsworth 1984, 1993: 32–53. See also Taplin 1992: 26 n. 24.
[12] Finley et al. 1964; cf. Finley 1973, ch. 1, 'Myth, Memory and History'.
[13] Hainsworth 1984, esp. 117, 121.

every warrior whom he names in the *Iliad*; names came into his mind, and seemed to fit – a sign that the Muses were at his side, smiling upon his work. The borderline between adaptation of tradition and creative development, here as elsewhere, is impossible for us to draw, and may have been as hard for the original poet. The poet, then, is not primarily a chronicler. Nor does he attempt to connect the tale he tells with the present day, whether by offering certain characters as exemplary figures for his own age, or more explicitly by tracing the genealogy of royal families or particular patrons back to the heroes of old – a practice easily paralleled in other poetic traditions, and most influentially followed by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Genealogy is important in the *Iliad* (less so in the more individualist *Odyssey*, where the hero is not competing among equals), but principally in self-assertive speeches, in which the heroes can declare themselves and define their status. There is little sign that Homer's audiences found special satisfaction in the exploits of their supposed ancestors. The most plausible case is the reference to the future destiny of Aeneas' descendants (picked up and developed by Roman readers), which has been read as addressed to self-styled Aeneadae in the Troad.[14] But this example is most notable for its isolation. For Homer and his predecessors, the glorious past mattered more than reflected glory in the present.[15]

2. Poems behind poems

A major issue is whether the Homeric epics are representative or exceptional. The question can also be posed in chronological terms: do they represent the mature and typical form of the epic tradition, or a glorious final flowering? It is at any rate clear that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* presuppose, and were preceded by, other poems on a wide range of epic themes.[16] This is evident from references within the poems themselves. We may distinguish references to other episodes in the Trojan War and its aftermath – the abduction of Helen, the wound of Philoctetes, the gathering at Aulis, the first embassy to the Trojans, the death of

[14] *Il.* 20.306–8; cf. *h Aphrod.* 196–7; P. M. Smith 1981 (against historical reference) and Faulkner 2008: 3–7 (in favour). Other possible cases are much less plainly marked: see e.g. Janko 1992: 19, 382, etc., arguing for disguised compliments to families claiming heroic descent; M. L. West 1997a: 628–9. On later, similar claims, see Thomas 1989: 100–8, 173–95.

[15] For early genealogies and lists see Jeffery 1961: 59–61; Hornblower 1994: 9–12.

[16] For a survey of these, see now M. L. West 2011c: 28–37.

Achilles, the suicide of Ajax, and so forth – from allusions to other heroic tales which are less closely related to the Trojan War: amongst these are the story of Bellerophon, the wrath of Meleager, the war of the Seven against Thebes, the birth of Heracles and his many labours in service to Eurystheus, and the Argonautic expedition.[17] Within the Trojan saga, it is assumed that the audience knows what the situation is, why the armies are at war (see esp. *Il.* 1.159), and who the characters are: thus Achilles storms away in anger 'with Menoitios' son and his comrades' (1.307), that is, with Patroclus, who is mentioned shortly afterwards without the identification being made explicit.[18]

In a different category come stories about the gods. Again, it is obvious that the Olympians are familiar to the poet's audience, and that this familiarity derives not only from cult worship and visual representations but from previous song. The poems present the divine order as well established, with a clear hierarchy of power and division of provinces (1.533–5, 581; 15.185–217); we see not only from Hesiod's *Theogony* but also from a number of brief allusions in the poems that this was not an eternally fixed condition. There had been wars among the gods in earlier times: the overthrow of Cronos and the destruction of rival powers such as the Titans and Typhon are mentioned, but only in passing: the emphasis is on the security of Zeus's reign. The permanence of the gods in the *Iliad* ('happy and existing forever', 24.99) provides the essential foil to the short-lived and suffering mortals. Elsewhere, in the references to Zeus's adulteries and the complaints of Calypso, we catch hints of a freer intermingling of gods and mortals, with regular amatory encounters involving even the king of the gods (cf. Hes. *Theog.* 535; *Cat.* fr. 1.6–7). Again the Homeric epics are selective: of the leading figures only Achilles is the son of a divinity, and that privilege brings him little advantage: son of a goddess and a mortal, he stands between the two worlds, not wholly belonging to either.

Homer not only cited or alluded to other poems and stories but adapted them to play a part in his own work: for instance, a tale such as the death of Agamemnon, repeatedly cited but never retold at length in the *Odyssey*, is not evoked merely for the sake of digression, or even to advertise the range of the poet's repertoire; it is there to provide a

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[17] *Il.* 6.155–202; 9.527–99; 4.370–400; 19.95–133 (cf. 14.249–61, etc.); *Od.* 12.69–72 (not an exhaustive list).
[18] But for a different approach to such references, see Scodel 2002: 90–123.

contrast with the central story of Odysseus.[19] Other passages, such as the references in the *Iliad* to Heracles' experiences, can also be ingeniously brought into relation to the larger themes of the poem. Occasionally we may surmise that unusual or obscure versions are the inventions of the poet, to suit the argument of a particular speaker (e.g. *Il.* 1.396–406).[20] Moreover, we can see that the epics make use of a number of themes which might be used elsewhere with other heroes: heroic wrath, the wanderer's return, the descent to the underworld, the forging of divine armour, are all paralleled elsewhere in the Greek tradition, though in some cases the other texts may be echoing Homer. One case in which the borrower seems clearly to be Homer concerns the wanderings of Odysseus, and particularly the perils of the Clashing Rocks. In *Od.* 12.69–70, Circe warns the hero that only one ship has ever passed through these Rocks safely, 'the Argo, known to all men, sailing back from Aeëtes' (70) – known, presumably, through poetry. There is good reason to think that other characters and events in these books of the *Odyssey* have also been taken over from the Argonautic saga: Circe herself, sister of Aeëtes and Medea's aunt, seems to belong to that world.[21] None of this deprives Homer of originality; rather, it shows him as an active participant in a tradition which thrives on competition and constant reworking of well-established themes.

The complexity of Homer's relation to his 'sources' may be illustrated in more detail from the story of Meleager, as told by Phoenix to Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*.[22] Phoenix comments that, until now, no-one could have found fault with Achilles' anger at Agamemnon, but if he still holds out in his refusal to accept the compensation, he may suffer the fate of Meleager, who persisted too long in a similar resentful resignation from war, and lost all chance of gifts in the end. The narrative of Meleager includes a number of parallels with the sequence of events in the *Iliad* itself: in particular, the name of the hero's wife, who eventually persuades him to abandon his wrath, is given as Kleopatra (though reference is also made to another name), apparently an anticipation of the parallel role of Patroclus, who will succeed in persuading Achilles to relent.[23] The motif

[19] *Od.* 1.29–43, 298–300; 3.193–8, 248–312; 4. 512–37; 11.387–434; 24.20–2, 95–7, 198–201; Garvie 1986: ix–xii.
[20] Willcock 1964, 1977; Braswell 1971. This position is opposed by Lang 1983; also by Slatkin 1991, ch. 2, discussing the specific case in Book 1.
[21] See Meuli 1921: 87–115; Page 1955: 2; Braswell 1988: 6–8; M. L. West 2005.
[22] For bibliography on this speech, see Reichel 1994: 111 n. 1; Alden 2000: ch. 7.
[23] J. T. Kakridis 1949: 11–42; March 1987: 27–46.

of Meleager's anger, which is not found in other versions of the tale, appears to be Homer's invention, in order to bring the story into line with the main plot of the epic. A further point is that, in later versions, Meleager dies on the battlefield as a result of his mother's magical revenge for the slaying of her brothers: it is disputed whether Homer suppresses this finale (which would be ill-suited to Phoenix's persuasive task), or whether the version is a later addition to the story.[24] It is, in any case, clear that Phoenix's narrative performs several functions. Like other 'paradigms', it offers an argument to show why the listener, here Achilles, should follow the speaker's advice. But Phoenix's perspective is limited, in two respects. First, he assumes that the worst thing that can happen is for Achilles to lose the chance of the gifts now being offered. In fact, in Book 19, Achilles will receive the gifts anyway, despite his persistence in anger; but they will be meaningless to him because of the far greater anger and grief aroused by the death of Patroclus. Second, in the more theological passage which precedes the Meleager tale, Phoenix advises Achilles to respect the spirits of Prayer, the Litai, or he may suffer the consequences (9.502–14). This simple moralizing has sometimes been taken as endorsed by the poet,[25] but that reading seems to give undue importance to the words of a minor character; nor does Phoenix's ideal picture of divine justice receive much confirmation elsewhere in the poem. If Achilles is 'punished' for excess, it is in a more subtle and less overtly moralizing way. Finally, if the poet is indeed aware of some version in which Meleager's wrath ends in death, it is natural that Phoenix should suppress so grim a conclusion, but it is possible that the audience, alert to the omission, may anticipate the analogous fate of Achilles and relish the irony of the characters' efforts to evade the consequences of this parallel.[26]

3. Poetic language

The traditional nature of Homeric poetry is also clear on the level of language.[27] The poems are composed in a version of Greek which

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[24] Bacchyl. 5.94–154; Aesch. *Cho.* 594–601; Ov. *Met.* 8. 260–546; Apollod. 1.8.2. Bremmer 1988 argues that this version is post-Homeric.

[25] Bowra 1930: 19–23; similarly Hainsworth 1993: 56–7.

[26] See further Schadewaldt 1938: 139–42; Rosner 1976; Bannert 1981; Swain 1988; Griffin 1995; and Alden 2000, ch. 7.

[27] The standard work is Chantraine 1948–53; see also Monro 1891. More accessible are Palmer 1962, 1980: 83–101; Janko 1992: 8–19; Horrocks 1997; Colvin 2007: 49–53, 192–201; Willi 2011.

was never spoken by a single people or in a single place: it is an amal-
gam of several dialects. Of these the predominant is Ionic, spoken by
the Greeks of Asia Minor (Turkey), on some of the Aegean islands,
such as Chios, and elsewhere. Second place goes to Aeolic, the form
of Greek spoken by the people of northern Greece (Boeotia,
Thessaly) and on Lesbos. Of lesser importance are the elements of dic-
tion perhaps originating in southern Greece in Mycenaean times and
labelled Arcado-Cypriot (because this dialect survived in Arcadia and
Cyprus in historical times).

How, when, and where this amalgam evolved is obscure to us. Its
advantages to the poets are somewhat clearer. Ionic and Aeolic offer
alternative words and morphological forms which coexist in the
Homeric text, and these are usually of differing metrical shape. Thus
we find five metrically differing forms of the verb 'to be' (εἶναι, ἔμεν,
ἔμμεν, ἔμεναι, ἔμμεναι). The poet can employ these different forms
to suit the needs of the metre. The common word for 'ship', ναῦς,
has dative plural ναυσί in Attic, but the epic also uses νηυσί (Ionic),
ναῦφι (an archaic form scarcely found after Homer), and even
νήεσσι, an artificial combination involving Ionic stem and Aeolic ter-
mination. The poems are also inconsistent in using forms which derive
from different periods: for instance, the old genitive in –οιο is found
alongside the later and more familiar –ου. A key discovery in terms of
the 'layering' of Homeric language was Richard Bentley's identification
(1732) of the effects of the consonant 'w', represented in some inscrip-
tions by the letter ϝ, digamma. Digammas do not occur in our manu-
scripts, because the sound was lost in Ionic at an early date (though it
survived as a numeral). But many Homeric verses will only scan if a
digamma is assumed at the start of a word that in the established
Homeric text begins with a vowel (e.g. ἄναξ, οἶκος). Hence lines or for-
mulae that need a digamma are likely to be older than those which are
composed without respecting its presence. Bentley's detection of this
principle, derided by his contemporaries, is now seen as one of the
most brilliant insights in modern philology.

Metrical needs also explain variation between contracted and uncon-
tracted forms of verbs, addition or omission of augment, and similar
licences. Words can be modified or used where they are linguistically
wrong but poetically convenient (e.g. εὐρύοπα, properly an accusative,
is sometimes treated as nominative or vocative). But metre, however
important, does not explain everything. Sometimes strange words and
exotic forms seem to be used because they have poetic distinction. At