INTRODUCTION TO THE HOMERIC ILIAD AND ODYSSEY

BY GREGORY NAGY

Admired through the ages as the ultimate epic, Homer’s Iliad, along with its companion-piece, the Odyssey, was venerated by the ancient Greeks themselves as the cornerstone of their civilization. By force of its prestige, the Iliad sets the standard for the definition of the word epic: an expansive poem of enormous scope, composed in an archaic and superbly elevated style of language, concerning the wondrous deeds of heroes. That these deeds were meant to arouse a sense of wonder or marvel is difficult for the modern mind to comprehend, especially in a time when even such words as wonderful or marvelous have lost much of their evocative power. Nor is it any easier to grasp the ancient Greek concept of hero (the English word is descended from the Greek), going beyond the word’s ordinary levels of meaning in casual contemporary usage.

What, then, were the heroes of the Iliad? In ancient Greek myth, heroes were humans, male or female, of the remote past, endowed with superhuman abilities and descended from the immortal gods themselves. The prime example is Akhilleus, more commonly known as Achilles in the English tradition. This, the greatest hero of the Iliad, was the son of Thetis, a sea-goddess known for her far-reaching cosmic powers. It is clear in the epic, however, that the father of Achilles is mortal, and that this greatest of heroes must therefore be mortal as well. So also with all the ancient Greek stories of the heroes: even though they are all descended in some way or another from the gods, however many generations removed, heroes are mortals, subject to death. No matter how many immortals you find in a family tree, the intrusion of even a single mortal will make all successive descendants mortal. Mortality, not immortality, is the dominant gene.

In some stories, true, the gods themselves can bring it about that the hero becomes miraculously restored to life after death - a life of immortality. The story of Herakles, who had been sired by Zeus, the chief of all the gods, is perhaps the most celebrated instance. But even in such a case, the hero has to die first. It is only after the most excruciating pains, culminating in his death at the funeral pyre on the peak of Mount Oeta, that Herakles is at long last admitted to the company of immortals. In short, the hero can be immortalized, but the fundamental painful fact remains: the hero is not by nature immortal.

1 This text is a rewritten (2007) version of Nagy’s Introduction to Homer, The Iliad, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (Everyman’s Library no. 60, Knopf, New York 1992) v-xxi.

2 This opening sentence conveys a distinction between two perspectives: (1) a long-term assessment from the standpoint of the present and (2) a shorter-term assessment from the standpoint of a historical cross-section of the ancient Greek past, focusing on the city-state of Athens around the second half of the fifth century BCE. I justify the focus on fifth-century Athens, the Classical setting of “the ancient Greeks,” on the basis of two arguments: (a) that the ultimate form of the Iliad and Odyssey as we know them was decisively shaped in Athens during various historical periods (see my books Homeric Questions [1996] 42-43 and Poetry as Performance [1996] 110-111) and (b) that one of these periods was the second half of the fifth century (HQ 75-76 n. 37 and PP 111 nn. 23 and 24). If these arguments are valid, then the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey achieved canonical status not only from the retrospective standpoint of our present but also from the contemporary standpoint of the Classical period. To this extent, I can justify my reference to the reception of Homeric poetry by “the ancient Greeks themselves.” I choose as representative of the Classical period a statement of Herodotus, which is highlighted in the discussion that follows.

3 I seek to defamiliarize, from the start, the English word “hero”, drawing it back to the semantics of Classical Greek hērōs (plural hērōes), as analyzed at HQ 47-48. The meaning of the Greek word has two dimensions: (1) myth and (2) ritual; the second dimension is completely absent in the English word “hero.” See also Nagy, “The Epic Hero.” In A Companion to Ancient Epic (ed. John M. Foley; Oxford 2005) 71-89. Fuller version at http://chs.harvard.edu/publications.sec/online_print_books.ssp/gregory_nagy_the_epic/bn_u_tei.xml

4 A basic text is Euripides’ Herakles.
For the moment, I note merely in passing that the *Odyssey* is the most extended narrative about immortalization. But any such immortalization happens only on a symbolic level. The *Odyssey* makes it clear that Odysseus will have to die, even if it happens in a prophecy, beyond the framework of the surface narrative.

By contrast with heroes, the gods themselves are exempt from the ultimate pain of death. When the god Ares goes through the motions of death after he is taken off guard and wounded by the mortal Diomedes in Scroll V of the *Iliad*, we detect a touch of humor in the Homeric treatment of the scene, owing to the fact that this particular ‘death’ is a mock death. In the world of epic, the dead seriousness of death can be experienced only by humans.

Mortality is the dominant theme in the stories of ancient Greek heroes, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are no exception. Mortality is the burning question for the heroes of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and for Achilles and Odysseus in particular. The human condition of mortality, with all its ordeals, defines heroic life itself. The certainty that one day you will die makes you human, distinct from animals who are unaware of their future death and from the immortal gods. All the ordeals of the human condition culminate in the ultimate ordeal of a warrior hero’s violent death in battle, detailed in all its ghastly varieties by the poet of the *Iliad*.

This deep preoccupation with the primal experience of violent death in war has several possible explanations. Some argue that the answer has to be sought in the simple fact that ancient Greek society accepted war as a necessary and even important part of life. Others seek a deeper answer by pointing to the poet’s awe-struck sense of uncontrollable forces at work in the universe, even of a personified concept of Force itself, which then becomes, through the poet’s own artistic powers, some kind of eerie aesthetic thing.

But there are other answers as well, owing to approaches that delve deeply into the role of religion and, more specifically, into the religious practices of hero-worship and animal-sacrifice in ancient Greece. Of particular interest is the well-attested Greek custom of worshipping a hero precisely by way of slaughtering a sacrificial animal, ordinarily a ram.

There is broad cultural evidence suggesting that hero-worship in ancient Greece was not created out of stories like that of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but was in fact independent of them. The stories, on the other hand, were based on the religious practices, though not always directly. There are even myths that draw into an explicit parallel the violent death of a hero and the sacrificial slaughter of an animal. For example, the description of the death of the hero Patroklos in Scroll XVI of the *Iliad* parallels in striking detail the stylized description, documented elsewhere in Homeric poetry (*Odyssey* Scroll iii), of the slaughter of a sacrificial heifer: in both cases, the victim is first stunned and disoriented by a fatal blow from behind, then struck frontally by another fatal blow, and then finally administered the coup de grâce. For another example, we may consider an ancient Greek vase-painting that represents the same heroic warrior Patroklos in the shape of a sacrificial ram lying supine with its legs in the air and its throat slit open (lettering next to the painted figure specifies Patroklos).

Evidence also places these practices of hero-worship and animal-sacrifice precisely during the era when the stories of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* took shape. Yet, curiously enough, we find practically no mention there of hero-worship and very little detailed description of animal-sacrifice. Homeric poetry, as a medium that achieved its general appeal to the Greeks by virtue of avoiding the parochial concerns of specific locales or regions, tended to avoid realistic descriptions of any ritual, not just ritual sacrifice.

---

5 Here I am thinking primarily of death in war, but we must not forget the epic theme of death at sea.
Introduction to the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey

This pattern of avoidance is to be expected, given that any ritual tends to be a localized phenomenon in ancient Greece. What sacrificial scenes we do find in the epics are markedly stylized, devoid of the kind of details that characterize real sacrifices as documented in archaeological and historical evidence. In real sacrifice the parts of the animal victim’s body correspond to the members of the body politic. The ritual dismemberment of the animal’s body in sacrifice sets a mental pattern for the idea of the reassembly of the hero’s body in myths of immortalization. Given, then, that Homeric poetry avoids delving into the details of dismemberment as it applies to animals, in that it avoids the details of sacrificial practice, we may expect a parallel avoidance of the topic of immortalization for the hero. The local practices of hero-worship, contemporaneous with the evolution of Homeric poetry as we know it, are clearly founded on religious notions of heroic immortalization.

While personal immortalization is thus too localized in orientation for epics, the hero’s death in battle, in all its stunning varieties, is universally acceptable. The Iliad seems to make up for its avoidance of details concerning the sacrifices of animals by dwelling on details concerning the martial deaths of heroes. In this way Homeric poetry, with its staggering volume of minutely detailed descriptions of the deaths of warriors, can serve as a compensation for sacrifice itself.

Such deep concerns about the human condition are organized by Homeric poetry in a framework of heroic portraits, with those of Achilles and Odysseus serving as the centerpieces of the Iliad and Odyssey respectively. Let us begin with Achilles. Here is a monolithic and fiercely uncompromising man who actively chooses violent death over life in order to win the glory of being remembered forever in epic poetry (Iliad IX 413). Here is a man of unbending principle who cannot allow his values to be compromised - not even by the desperate needs of his near and dear friends who are begging him to bend his will, bend it just enough to save his own people. Here is a man of constant sorrow, who can never forgive himself for having unwittingly allowed his nearest and dearest friend, Patroklos, to take his place in battle and be killed in his stead, slaughtered like a sacrificial animal - all on account of his own refusal to bend his will by coming to the aid of his fellow warriors. Here is a man, finally, of unspeakable anger, an anger so intense that the poet words it the same way that he words the anger of the gods, even of Zeus himself.

The gods of Homer’s Iliad take out their anger actively, as in the poet’s descriptions of the destructive fire unleashed by the thunderbolt of Zeus. The central hero of the Iliad at first takes out his anger passively, by withdrawing his vital presence from his own people. The hero’s anger is directed away from the enemy and toward his own people, whose king, Agamemnon, has insulted Achilles’ honor and demeaned his sense of self. This passive anger of Achilles translates into the active success of the enemy in the hero’s absence, and the enemy’s success is compared, ironically, to the destructive fire unleashed by the thunderbolt of Zeus. In this way, the passive anger of the hero translates symbolically into the active anger of the god. Then, in response to the death of Patroklos, Achilles’ anger modulates into an active phase - active no longer in a symbolic but in a real sense. The hero’s anger is redirected, away from his own people and back toward his enemy.

This new phase of Achilles’ anger consumes the hero in a paroxysm of self-destructiveness. His fiery rage plummets him to the depths of brutality, as he begins to view the enemy as the ultimate Other, to be hated with such an intensity that Achilles can even bring himself, in a moment of ultimate fury, to express that most ghastly of desires, to eat the flesh of Hector, the man he is about to kill. The Iliad is the story of a hero’s pain, culminating in an anger that degrades him to the level of a savage animal, to the depths of bestiality. This same pain, however, this same intense feeling of loss, will ultimately make the savage anger subside in a moment of heroic self-recognition that elevates Achilles to the highest realms of humanity, of humanism. At the end of the Iliad, as he begins to recognize the pain of his deadliest
enemy, of the Other, he begins to achieve a true recognition of the Self. The anger is at an end. And the story can end as well.  

We find the poet’s own statement about the subject of the *Iliad* in the original Greek poem’s very first word: Anger. The song of the *Iliad* - for at the time, poets were singers, performers, and their poems were sung - is about the anger, the doomed and ruinous anger, of the hero Achilles. The singer was following the rules of his craft in summing up the whole song, all 100,000 or so words, in one single word, the first word of the song. So also in the *Odyssey*, the first word, Man, tells the subject of the song. There the singer calls upon the Muse, goddess of the special Memory that makes him a singer, to tell him the story of the Man, the many-sided man, the hero Odysseus, who wandered so many countless ways in his voyages at sea after his heroic exploit of masterminding the capture and destruction of Troy. The Muse is imagined as telling the singer his song, and the singer can then sing this song to others. In the same way, here in the *Iliad*, the singer calls upon the Goddess to tell the story of the Anger, the doomed and ruinous anger, of the hero Achilles, which caused countless losses and woes for Greeks and Trojans alike in the war that later culminated in the destruction of Troy.  

We see from this paraphrase of the beginnings of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that the rules of the singer’s craft extend beyond the naming of the main subject with the first word. In the original Greek of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the first word announcing the subject - Anger, Man - is followed by a specially chosen adjective setting the mood - doomed anger, many-sided man - to be followed in turn by a relative clause that frames the story by outlining the plot - the doomed anger that caused countless losses and woes, the many-sided man who wandered countless ways.  

The symmetry of these two monumental compositions, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, goes beyond their strict adherence to the rules of introducing an ancient Greek song. For they counterbalance each other throughout their vast stretches of narrative, in a steady rhythmic flow of verses, lines called dactylic hexameters (the *Iliad* contains over 15,000 lines and the *Odyssey*, over 12,000). The counterbalancing focuses on the central plot and the characterization of the principal hero in each. Achilles’ monolithic personality, that of the mightiest warrior of his era who was monumentally proud of his martial exploits and his physical prowess, is matched against the many-sidedness of Odysseus, famed for his crafty stratagems and cunning intelligence.  

The symmetry of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* goes even further: between the two of them, these two songs give the impression of incorporating most of whatever was worth retelling about the heroic age - at least from the standpoint of the Greeks in the Classical period of the fifth century BCE and thereafter. The staggering comprehensiveness of these two songs is apparent even from a cursory glance. For example, the *Iliad* not only tells the story that it says it will tell, about Achilles’ anger and how it led to countless woes as the Greeks went on fighting it out with the Trojans and striving to ward off the fiery onslaught of Hector. It also manages to retell or even relive, though with varying degrees of directness or fullness of narrative, the entire Tale of Troy, including from the earlier points of the story-line such memorable moments as the Judgment of Paris, the Abduction of Helen, and the Assembly of Ships. More than that: the *Iliad* foreshadows the Death of Achilles, which does not occur within the bounds of its own plot. In short, although the story of the *Iliad* directly covers only a short stretch of the whole story of Troy, thereby resembling the compressed time-frame of Classical Greek tragedy (Aristotle makes this observation in his *Poetics*), it still manages to mention something about practically everything that happened at Troy, otherwise known as Ilion. Hence the epic’s title - the Tale of Ilion, the *Iliad*.  

The *Odyssey* adds much more, especially about the so-called Epic Cycle. It even features the story of the Trojan Horse in Scroll viii.

---

When I say “end” here, I have in mind the double meaning of the Greek word *telex*: (1) end of a line (2) coming full circle.
For the Greeks of the fifth century BCE and thereafter, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, these two seemingly all-inclusive and symmetrical songs, were the creation of the Master Singer called Homer, reputed to have lived centuries earlier. Homer was presumed to be contemporaneous with another Master Singer called Hesiod, who was credited with two other definitive symmetrical songs, the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. About the real Homer, there is next to nothing that we can recover from the ancient world. Nor do we have much better luck with Hesiod, except perhaps for whatever the singer says about himself in his own two songs. In the case of Homer, we do not even have this much to start with, at least not in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*: in neither song does the singer say anything about himself that could be construed as historical information. It can even be said that there is no evidence for the existence of a Homer - and hardly that much more for the existence of a Hesiod.

What we do know for sure, however, is that the Greeks of the Classical period thought of Homer and Hesiod as their first authors, their primary authors. So it is not only for the modern reader that Homer and Hesiod represent the earliest phase of Greek literature. It is moreover a historical fact that Homer and Hesiod were eventually credited by the ancient Greeks with the very foundation of Greek literature. Our primary authority for this fact is none other than the so-called Father of History himself, Herodotus, who observes in Scroll 2 (53.1-3) of his *Histories* that Homer and Hesiod, by way of their songs, had given the Greeks their first definitive statement about the gods. In a traditional society like that of the ancient Greeks, where the very idea of defining the gods is the equivalent of defining the society itself, this observation by Herodotus amounts to a claim that the songs of Homer and Hesiod are the basis of Greek civilization.

Who, then, was Homer? It is no exaggeration to answer that, along with Hesiod, he had become the prime culture hero of Greek civilization in the Classical period of the fifth century and thereafter. It was a common practice of the ancient Greeks to attribute any major achievement of society, even if this achievement may have taken place through a lengthy period of social evolution, to the personal breakthrough of a culture hero who was pictured as having made his monumental contribution in the earliest imaginable era of the culture. Greek myths about lawgivers, for example, tended to reconstruct these figures, whether or not they really ever existed, as the originators of the sum total of customary law as it evolved through time. The same sort of evolutionary model may well apply to the figure of Homer as an originator of heroic song.

The model can even be extended from Homer to Homeric song. There is evidence that a type of story, represented in a wide variety of cultures where the evolution of a song tradition moves slowly ahead in time until it reaches a relatively static phase, reinterprets itself as if it resulted from a single event. There were many such stories about Homer in ancient Greece, and what matters most is not so much the stories themselves but what they reveal about society’s need to account for the evolution of Homeric song. The internal evidence of the Homeric verses, both in their linguistic development and in their datable references, points to an ongoing evolution of Homeric song embracing a vast stretch of time that lasted perhaps as long as a thousand years, extending from the second millennium BCE. This period culminated in a static phase that lasted about two centuries, framed by a formative stage in the later part of the eighth century BCE, where the epic was taking on its present shape, and a definitive stage, in the middle of the sixth, where the epic reached its final form.

The basic historical fact remains, in any case, that the figure of Homer had become, by the Classical period of the fifth century BCE, a primary culture hero credited with the creation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Little wonder, then, that so many Greek cities - Athens included - claimed to be his birthplace. Such rivalry for the possession of Homer points to the increasingly widespread refinement of his identity through the cultural significance of Homeric song.

The subject of the *Iliad* bears witness to the cultural primacy of Homer in Greek civilization. The subject of this epic is not just the Anger of Achilles in particular and the age of heroes in general. The *Iliad*
Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey

purports to say everything that is worth saying about the Greeks - the Hellenes, as they called themselves in the Classical period. Not that the Iliad calls them Greeks. The Greeks in this song are a larger-than-life cultural construct of what they imagined themselves to have been in the distant age of heroes. These Greeks are retrojected Greeks, given such alternative Homeric names as Achaeans, Argives, Danaans, all three of which are used interchangeably to refer to these heroic ancestors whose very existence in song is for the Greeks the basis for their own self-definition as a people. It is as if the Iliad, in mirroring for the Greeks of the present an archetypal image of themselves in the past, served as an autobiography of a people.

On the surface these ancestral Greeks of the Iliad are on the offensive, attacking Troy. Underneath the surface, they are on the defensive, trying desperately to ward off the fiery onslaught of Hector, the leading Trojan hero. At a climactic point of the battle, Hector shouts out to his men:

‘Fire now! Bring it up,
and all together raise a battle shout!
Zeus gave this day to us as a recompense
for everything: now we may burn the ships
that came against the gods’ will to our shore.’

Iliad XV 718-720

With all their ships beached on the shores of the Hellespont, marked for destruction by the threatening fire of Hector, the ancestral Greeks are vulnerable to nothing short of extinction. The Iliad makes it quite clear: if their ships burn, the Greeks will never return home, to become the seafaring nation who are the present audience of the Iliad. In the Iliad, the very survival of this seafaring nation is at stake.

But what exactly is this Greek nation? The very idea of nationhood is an incongruity if we apply it to the era when the Iliad and Odyssey took shape. From the eighth through the fifth centuries BCE, the geographical area that we now recognize as ancient Greece was an agglomerate of territories controlled by scores of independent and competing city-states. The most important and prestigious of these were Athens, Sparta, Argos, Thebes, and Corinth. Each city-state, or polis, was a social entity unto itself, with its own government, customary laws, religious practices, dialect. The topic of the city-state brings us to the hidden agenda of the Odyssey.

The fragmentation of Greece in this era was so pronounced that, looking back, it is hard to find genuine instances of cultural cohesion. One early example is the Olympic Games; another is the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi; still another, and the most obvious, is the poetic legacy of Homer and Hesiod. The Homeric Iliad and Odyssey together can be viewed as a marvel of cultural synthesis, integrating the diverse institutional heritage of this plurality of city-states, this kaleidoscopic Greek-speaking world, into a unified statement of cultural identity, of civilization.

The cultural universalism of the Iliad and Odyssey can best be appreciated when we consider the extent of the diversity that separated the Greek city-states from each other. Nowhere is this diversity more apparent than in the realm of religious practices. How people worshipped any given god, as we know from the historical evidence of the Classical era and thereafter, differed dramatically from one city-state to another. Yet the Iliad and Odyssey spoke of the gods in a way that united the varied cultural perceptions and sensitivities of a vast variety of city-states, large and small. The religious dimensions of these gods, with Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, and Apollo in the forefront, were destined to be shaded over by this Homeric process of synthesis, but their divine reality became highlighted as a cultural permanence in the same process. The modern reader may be struck by what seems on the surface to be a distinctly irreligious attitude of Homeric song towards the gods, but the universal cultural edifice of these gods’ lofty abode on Mount Olympus was in fact built up from a diversity of unspoken religious foundations. When Herodotus is saying that Homer and Hesiod, by way of their songs, had given the Greeks their first definitive statement about the gods, he is in effect acknowledging the Olympian
Introduction to the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey

synthesis that had been bestowed on civilization by Homeric and Hesiodic song. It is the history of Greek civilization, then, that the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey define.

To say that an epic like the Iliad is about the Greeks and what it is to be a Greek is not far from saying that the Iliad is about Achilles. We have seen how this hero, as the very first words of the song make clear, is the focal point of the Iliad. Given the importance of the Iliad to the Greeks, we may interpret this single fact to mean that Achilles is also a focal point of Greek civilization. Just how important he is, however, can be illustrated beyond the testimony of Homeric song. Let us take for example an inherited custom connected with the premier social event for all Greeks, the Olympic Games. We know from ancient sources that the traditional ceremony inaugurating this seasonally recurring pan-Hellenic event centers on Achilles: on an appointed day when the Games are to begin, the local women of Elis, the place where the Olympics were held, fix their gaze on the sun as it sets into the Western horizon and begin ceremonially to weep for the hero.\(^7\)

The prestige accorded by ancient Greek civilization to the figure of Achilles, and the strong emotional attachment that goes with it, is worthy of our attention especially because modern readers, both men and women, young and old, often find themselves relatively unresponsive to this sullen and darkly brooding hero. Few today feel empathy for his sorrow, which the hero of the Iliad himself describes as an everlasting one. The modern reader finds it much easier to feel empathy for Hector, the champion hero of the Trojans, whose heart-wrenching farewell to his wife and small son, soon to become his widow and orphan, is often singled out by modern readers as the most memorable scene of the Iliad. For the ancient Greeks as well, we may be sure, the figure of Hector evoked empathy. The difference, however, is that for them, the pathos of Hector resembles most closely the pathos of Achilles himself. Just as Hector’s death evokes the sorrow of unfulfilled promise, even more so does the death of Achilles.

While Hector is the idealized husband and father cut down in his prime, Achilles is the idealized bridegroom, sensual in his heroic beauty and likewise doomed to an untimely death. In the songs of Sappho, it is Achilles who figures as the ultimate bridegroom. The very mention of him in song conjures up the picture of a beautiful flower cut down at the peak of its bloom. This is how his own mother sings of Achilles in Scroll XVIII of the Iliad, in a beautiful song of lament that prefigures the hero’s untimely death:

\[ \ldots \text{...how sore my heart is! Now my life is pain} \]
\[ \text{for my great son’s dark destiny! I bore} \]
\[ \text{a child flawless and strong beyond all men.} \]
\[ \text{He flourished like a green shoot, and I brought him} \]
\[ \text{to manhood like a blossoming orchard tree,} \]
\[ \text{only to send him in the ships to Ilión} \]
\[ \text{to war with Trojans. Now I shall never see him} \]
\[ \text{entering Peleus’ hall, his home, again.} \]

\[ Iliad \text{ XVIII 53–60} \]

All the wistful beauty of sorrow for a life cut short comes back to life in song, and that song of the hero’s mother extends into a song that becomes the Iliad itself. For the culture of the Greeks was, and still is, a song culture. For them, to weep is to sing a lament, and the sorrow, in all its natural reality of physically crying and sobbing, is not at all incompatible with the art of the song: it flows into it.

If we consider the evocative power that we can sometimes find in even the simplest contemporary popular tunes about the sorrows of war and death, we will have at least something to compare with the emotional and esthetic response to Achilles in the song culture of the ancient Greek world. Thinking of Achilles leads us to beautiful sad songs. As we recall the detail about the institutionalized weeping of the

---

\(^7\) Pausanias 6.23.3.
local women at the commencement of the Olympics, we may note that this act of weeping was considered an act of singing - or keening. In the words of the fifth-century poet Pindar, the keening of the Muses, the ‘Maidens of Helicon’, over the dead Achilles extends into the song of the present:

When he died, the songs did not leave him, but the Maidens of Helicon stood by his funeral pyre and his funeral mound, and they poured forth a lament that is very renowned. And so the gods decided to hand over that worthy man, dead as he was, to the songs of the goddesses.

Pindar Isthmian 8.56-60

The sadness of Achilles’ song is of course a necessity of tradition, just as the hero’s death, his mortality, is necessary. The hero, the story of the hero, cannot be complete if he lives on. For in death the hero wins the ultimate prize of life eternal in song. As Achilles himself declares, his heroic death will transcend the fleeting beauty of earthbound life:

‘If ... I remain to fight around Troy town, I lose all hope of home but gain unfading glory.’

Iliad IX 412-413

The Greek word kleos, which translates here as ‘glory’, conventionally refers to the glory of song, while aphthiton or ‘unfading’ evokes the vitality of a blossoming plant. His glory in song, then, unlike the beauty of a flower, will never fade. And the song of kleos will remain forever alive in the civilization that sings Achilles’ glorious epic.

For Odysseus, no such choice needs to be made. The song of his homecoming, his nostos, is the same thing as his kleos. This kleos too, as we hear it proclaimed at the end of the Odyssey, will be sung for all time.

In Plato’s Ion, which gives us a portrait of a virtuoso performer of Homeric song in the Classical era, there is a vivid reference to performances of the Iliad and Odyssey before an audience of more than 20,000 at a seasonally recurring festival at Athens. What is especially remarkable about this reference is the image of this audience, all of them, breaking down and weeping as they hear the saddest moments of the song - or feeling their hair stand on end at the most terrifying moments. (In terms of Aristotle’s Poetics, they are experiencing pity and fear.) The performer describes himself as he gazes down upon a sea of faces in the audience, all eyes reacting simultaneously to his Homeric song. Looks from eyes filled with tears alternate with looks of terror or even sheer wonder as the story of Homeric song oscillates from one emotion to another:

As I look down at them from the podium on high, I see them, each and every time, crying or looking terrified, filled with a sense of wonder at what is being retold.

Plato Ion 535e

Yes, the songs of Achilles and Odysseus were ever being retold, nurtured by the song culture that had generated them. But even beyond the song culture, beyond Greek civilization, the epic lives on even in our time, and the wonder of it all is that one of its heroes himself foretold it.