
Cortez in Darien

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THE GREEKS. The Greeks. In our A-Camp stood, among the weapons racks and jungle plane antenna cables and duty rosters, a biiiiiiiiiiiiig white Kelvinator refrigerator, packed with unrationed Cokes kept cold by an eternally-running ten-KW generator whose cycle-setting (the gauge had been shattered by a mortar fragment one night) we adjusted using a tape-recorder and a Frank Sinatra tape. When Frank's "myyyyyyyyyyyyyyy-cyyyyyye waaaaaaaaaaaay" sounded about right, we figured we were on sixty cycles and let it go. One day, shuffling in off sandbag detail with my montagnards to snatch a Coke, I took the grease pencil we tied to the fridge with a string and used to keep track of drinks drunk to write across the upper door of the thing: "Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα . . ." First line of Homer's *Odyssey*: "Sing to me the man, O Muse . . ." That evening when I got back from LP and went after yet another Coke, I discovered that someone had written with the same grease pencil in bold black characters beneath my inscription this: . . . πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλά/ πλάγχθη, ". . . full of ruse and who suffered many woes," the last part of the same first verse of the *Odyssey*. I spent the remaining months of my tour and the intervening years trying to figure out which of my buddies on that twelve-man A Detachment knew Homeric Greek and pierced my vanity. Of course no one would own up to it. Yet, there was another schoolboy there with me. And that shared experience is a debt I owe to the dozens of Unrats and Chippings and Gradgrinds who filled my head with the stuff that saw me through.

I suppose no one gets out of school without reading the sonnet by John Keats that begins "Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold/ And many goodly states and kingdoms seen." Homer, claims Keats, is a dominion like one of these. The little poem is

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singular among others equally famous because its final and soaring image reposes on an error. In what is perhaps the most famous of literary blunders, the unlucky Keats has Cortez and not Balboa (or one of them) stare at the Pacific, "Silent, upon a peak in Darien." The exercise, of course, is to see the beauty, retrieve the passion, uncover and correct the error, but not discount the power of the work for its inaccuracy.

But somehow, we always want to twit Keats about his imperfect history. And many there are who find that mislaid fact a stumbling block. I have in my time been such a one.

There is a line in the *Iliad*, somewhere near the end, which even the clumsiest teacher usually manages to find and show off to students. It's the one in which Achilles lops off a Trojan head, leaving the marrow to burble up, *μυελὸς σφονδυλίων* in Greek, out of the now uncorked spine. A gruesome image. And fertile for the classroom. It tells us that war is—oh gosh!—bad and will undo us and we'd better find a way to stop it if we don't all want to see our collective marrow come burbling up out of our collective spine.

I still remember the day that line surfaced in prep school English class and my quiet astonishment at hearing that Homer, who had spent thousands of lines singing with evident relish the heroic butchery of the Greeks and Trojans, didn't like war. This was my first brush with irony in literature. The poet's obvious delight in detailing this war reveals to us clever readers that he means just the contrary! Understanding that was a lot to ask of a seventeen-year-old, and I'm afraid I greeted the assertion with skepticism.

But over the years I guess I've read about as much Homer as anyone. For the longest time I could not get beyond that initial mistrust of an author whose notion of reality so poorly coincided with mine. I knew, as apparently Keats did not, that Balboa had first set eyes on the Pacific; and I knew, or at least I thought I did, that marrow did not burble. Somehow the picture of marrow, the phlegmatic, pinkish goo I had seen peering wistfully up at me out of soupbones, somehow the thought of that stuff spurting into the air confirmed to me the mendacity of Homer in particular and of literature in general. Whatever literature was about, I figured, had to be wholly divorced from the real life in which real men and women, for the most part unwillingly as far as I could tell, were called upon to function. Now, I supposed if that were all I'd seen, I'd be within my rights to remain a skeptic and disdain literature. But that's not all I've seen.

Around the end of March in 1969 at about two o'clock one starless morning I lay in the dust of our compound in the highlands of Vietnam while men outside using handmade bamboo quadrants and knotted string to compute parabolas lobbed 122mm rockets at us. They sort of whiffle as they go over, those things do. One slammed into the ground close enough to me to lift me up and plop me down in a heap. Shards of something rained down on me. I got up without really thinking and staggered over to the still-smoking crater. I stepped on an object in the dark, which I reflexively picked up. At that moment a flare burst over the camp and froze everything.

I held in my hand a severed human foot.

For a few seconds I couldn't fathom it. Flares, I guess you know, backlight everything. Soldiers are taught not to move a muscle in that flash of daylight. So I crouched there on the rim of that crater and peered at the little foot. It was sheared off a couple of inches above the ankle, and from its puckered flesh poked a stub of bone, a distal tibia I think it's called. A lumpy jelly burbled up and out of the shaft. It ran down the heel and over my fingers. Marrow. I cannot say how long I squatted motionless in the yellow glare riveted to my unearthly little trophy, but I was long in getting over it.

Homer was right. Marrow does burble.

And I began to wonder. If Homer was right about the marrow, what else had I discounted that he might be right about as well? After that, in odd moments—and there are plenty of odd moments in a war—I began to recast Homer in my head. I had read him carefully enough all right; I just hadn't understood. I soon found out just how much I had remembered and how many of those tired old scenes were charged now with a significance I had to learn.

All those episodes I had riffled through so casually now became important to me. If marrow did burble, if Homer somehow had firsthand knowledge on that score, what else did he know that I didn't? I recalled one thing: Homer didn't think much of modern men. "That's the way men are now," he would sneer, οἷοι νῦν βροτοὶ εἶσι, to explain why the old deeds looked so hopelessly grand to us. Sure enough, all the old soldiers from Korea or World War II, "the one wit' thuh numbah," scorned us kids: "You should have seen a real war!" Homer knew that.

And what got you killed? That hadn't changed either: σφέτεροι ἀτασθαλίας, that is, your own foolishness. Homer knew that, too. And Homer seemed to know what goes wrong with even good

men. He forgets and calls Aegisthos, lover of Clytemnestra and murderer of Agamemnon, ἀμύμων, blameless, when he should be δολόμητις, duplicitous. So good men do dumb things and wicked for passion's sake. But do they cease even so to be good?

And how did Odysseus know enough to dodge Nausikaa, the nymph? And Circe the witch? By what intuition would a middle-aged man just back from a long war turn down offers like that? What made him reluctant to “put the sword in its sheath,” κολεῶ ἄορ θεοῦ, as he was invited to do? Just what did he put—and where—for a year on that island? Why would such women as Nausikaa, Calypso, Circe find a tired, scarred old man attractive, anyhow?

Homer understood all that, as I was beginning to. He knew about digging foxholes, τάφρος ὀρυκτή, at any event. He knew about drugs, too, ἄνθινον εἶδαρ, flowery food, that sapped the will to go home. At night we listened to the φόρμιγξ λιγείη, the deep-voiced lyre, play us ἀοιδὴ νεωπάτη, the song freshest to men's ears. At that time it was the Animals and “House of the Rising Sun,” ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως. Some of my buddies chased the εὐζωνοί, well-girdled women of that Fortress to the East we had come to sack. Sorry. . . come to save.

Homer had evidently met my buddies, too. He sang of ὑπερφίαλος, wiseapple Ajax, a good man in a fight but a pain in the ass when drunk back in camp. Ποδώκης, swiftfooted, were all of us kids who wanted so badly to be heroes like Achilles. I never did like Achilles for my part, though, and the only thing I remembered about him was that he didn't enjoy being dead. Most of us trusted πολύτροπος, “been-around” Odysseus, who knew the score and planned on going home. Odysseus was not averse to hiding behind a tree and whomping someone whose back was turned. The ἵππος ξυστός, “horse of wood,” was after all the symbol of guerilla warfare and the Special Warfare center at Fort Bragg in those days.

What had bored me at school saved me now. As I sat through ambushes, at relay sites, on security, in darkness, all those infinitely rich episodes came back to me. Now they beguiled the numbing reality of patience, by which guerilla warfare is waged, through the very thing I had rejected them for in class. Each episode was a puzzle. I was grateful for puzzles now. Those Homeric scenes were, I swear it, treasures I hoarded more jealously than any simple souvenir. Memories have only one face; Homer had a

thousand, enough for the thousand moments of brute monotony. I came dimly to suspect that if Homer had known what he was talking about, maybe Goethe did, too. Rabelais. Cervantes.

Safe and cynical today, I cannot seem to set down here the depth of my gratitude to those swirling images of long-dead only-too-human heroes. I had found out firsthand that Homer knew what he was talking about. It had not been an act of faith, though, and I was a little ashamed that I had made him prove it to me. I had challenged him, lumpishly and brutally, to come up with proof. I chose to validate the poet's insight—and this is worse—by simple test of his knowledge of the absurdity of combat, of anatomy to be exact. I had required that whole shabby cataclysm to be staged so that I could see.

Did it come to this for everyone? And how did Homer's unerring eye for savagery qualify him to speak to me about sexuality, honor, despair, hope? Was I justified in concluding that someone with so faithful a regard for detail would not have missed telling detail elsewhere, or at least not likely?

And did Homer like or dislike war? Of course he disliked it, without for an instant dreaming that so silly a creature as man would ever find another way: σφέτεραι ἀτασθαλίας, remember? The leaders of Troy, γήραϊ πολέμοιο πεπαυμένοι, "don't fight any more because they are old." They sure do talk a lot, though, ἀγορηταὶ ἔσθλοί. And the men who fight will probably never know any more of the reason why than the Greeks did about Argive Helen: an unapproachable ideal and anything but virginal.

My guess, though, is that Homer cannot repress at least a grudging admiration for the excitement, the commotion, the grandeur released in battle. There is some sort of intensity in combat that he cannot seem to deride or dispel. The poet's unabashed adulation for his heroes, who owe all they are to war, is probably rightly damnable. Wouldn't some other kind of adversity or adventure do as well for the instruction of the young of their race and the gratification of their baser instincts? Homer doesn't rightly know, I suppose. If he did, I'm pretty sure he would have told us. He told us everything else.

Well, now I'm the middle-aged man with the scar. And I've wandered inland to settle, just like Odysseus. I still have the dog-eared copy of the *Ἰλιάς* I carried all through the war. I keep it so I won't forget how many times I've huddled in fear with that paperback in the trouser-pocket of my fatigues and won't try to persuade myself

I was ever a hero. And I guess you know that on the day Odysseus came home, νόστιμον ἦμαρ, his dog died and his wife looked at him funny and his friends threw things at him. He was probably happy for all that, even if Tennyson doesn't think so. But sometimes the old tales would make him cry, it seems to me. We can believe that a man like that cried.

Homer says so. And he was right about the marrow, wasn't he?