

EPIC REDUCTION: RECEPTIONS OF HOMER AND VIRGIL IN
MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this project is to account for the widespread reception of the epics of Homer and Virgil by American poets of the twentieth century. Since 1914, an unprecedented number of new poems interpreting the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* have appeared in the United States.

The vast majority of these modern versions are short, combining epic and lyric impulses in a dialectical form of genre that is shaped, I propose, by two cultural movements of the twentieth century: Modernism, and American humanism. Modernist poetics created a focus on the fragmentary and imagistic aspects of Homer and Virgil; and humanist philosophy sparked a unique trend of undergraduate literature survey courses in American colleges and universities, in which for the first time, in the mid-twentieth century, hundreds of thousands of students were exposed to the epics in translation, and with minimal historical contextualisation, prompting a clear opportunity for personal appropriation on a broad scale.

These main matrices for the reception of epic in the United States in the twentieth century are set out in the introduction and first chapter of this thesis. In the five remaining chapters, I have identified secondary threads of historical influence, scrutinised alongside poems that developed in that context, including the rise of Freudian and related psychologies; the experience of modern warfare; American national politics; first- and second-wave feminism; and anxiety surrounding poetic belatedness.

Although modern American versions of epic have been recognised in recent scholarship on the reception of Classics in twentieth-century poetry in English, no comprehensive account of the extent of the phenomenon has yet been attempted. The foundation of my arguments is a catalogue of almost 400 poems referring to Homer and Virgil, written by over 175 different American poets from 1914 to the present. Using a comparative methodology (after T. Ziolkowski, *Virgil and the Moderns*, 1993), and models of reception from German and English reception theory (including C. Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 1993), the thesis contributes to the areas of classical reception studies and American literary history, and provides a starting point for considering future steps in the evolution of the epic genre.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis and footnotes, in reference to the epics of Homer and Virgil:

Il. : D. Monro and T.W. Allen (1920) *Homeri Opera: Iliadis*. 2 vols. Oxford University Press.

Od. : T.W. Allen (1917) *Homeri Opera: Odysseae*. 2 vols. Oxford University Press.

Aen. : R.A.B. Mynors (1969) *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*. Oxford University Press.

All quotations from the Greek and Latin texts are taken from these editions, with citations indicating the book and line numbers (e.g. *Il.* 6.146). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from the prose versions by Martin Hammond, *Iliad* (1987) and *Odyssey* (2000), and David West, *Aeneid* (2003).

Richmond Lattimore, a poet, professor of Classics and major translator of Greek poetry in the twentieth century, remarked in 1964: ‘I notice with interest that, despite my training, I do not write any more poems with classical themes than most of my contemporaries do’.¹ For Lattimore, who published bestselling translations of the *Iliad* (1951) and the *Odyssey* (1965), and new lyric poems in the voices of Odysseus, Penelope, Elpenor and Circe,² classical themes were above all epic themes; and indeed recent scholarship on the reception of Classics in modern poetry has borne out his curious observation. At a time when the formal study of Greek and Latin literature in the original languages has experienced a seemingly permanent steep decline, poets writing in English appear to have created new works about classical subjects at a rate significantly higher than in previous periods of history.³

This spike in poetic receptions of Classics in the past century is particularly noticeable in relation to the epics of Homer and Virgil. A first impression of the phenomenon, which also serves to introduce something of the range of poets involved, may be gained from a comparative ‘head count’ extrapolated from certain recent surveys. For instance, in a dictionary of classical mythology in world art and literature from 1300 to the 1990s, Jane Davidson Reid notes 419 receptions of the story of Dido and Aeneas across all genres and media (including sculpture, painting, opera, theatre, prose and poetry).⁴ In the five centuries from 1300 to 1800, 14 poems appear on this subject (about 2.8 per century); from 1800 to 1932, no poetic receptions of the romance from the *Aeneid* are listed; but from 1933 to 1984,

¹ Lattimore in Auden et al. (1964), 58.

² Lattimore (1968).

³ Cf. Taplin (2002); and Harrison (2009): ‘It is an interesting but comprehensible paradox that classical texts have achieved a high profile in contemporary literature at a time when fewer people than ever can read these works in the original languages’ (1). On statistics for the decline of Latin and Greek in schools and universities in the United States, in particular, see Schein (2007), and Winterer (2002), 179-83.

⁴ Reid (1993), 48ff.

11 poetic versions of this episode appear. Similar stark patterns occur in the entries for other Homeric and Virgilian characters, as well (including Calypso, Circe, the Sirens, Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Achilles and Helen of Troy). These statistics drawn from Reid's work suggest that the reception of ancient epic in contemporary poetry in English increased sharply in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

That this phenomenon was centred in the United States is one of the proposals of this thesis. In Reid's sample of 11 poems about Aeneas and Dido since 1933, two are by English poets, one is by a Scottish poet, one is by an Italian poet – and *seven* are by American poets. Comparing academic studies of the reception of Homer and Virgil in English-speaking countries gives another clear view of this apparent slant toward American poetic versions. In his book *Virgil and the Moderns*, Theodore Ziolkowski juxtaposes chapters on the pre-1950 reception of Virgil in the United Kingdom ('Virgil in Britain') and in the United States ('Virgil in the New World').⁵ In the chapter on the U.K., he discusses poetic works by two British authors in relation to the *Aeneid* (T.S. Eliot and Cyril Connolly). By contrast, he reads the work of six American poets in comparison with Virgil's epic (Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, John Peale Bishop, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound). Ward Briggs, in an essay on the classical tradition in the United States, runs briskly through a list of American poets generally recognised as having pushed off against the *Odyssey* in their own work:

It is impossible to do justice to all the American poets who have written on classical subjects. Thoreau recounted Whitman declaiming Homer from atop a Broadway bus, and Odysseus has inspired poetry by other Americans from Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham in 1859 through Madison Cawein to Maxwell Anderson, Joseph Auslander, John Peale Bishop, John Ciardi, Gregory Corso, Mark Van Doren, Horace Gregory, Robert Lowell, Archibald Macleish, Edgar Lee Masters, W. S. Merwin, Richard Wilbur, and, perhaps most brilliant of all, Louise Glück in *Meadowlands*.⁶

The equivalent chapter in the same volume, on the presence of classics in the United Kingdom, by contrast, mentions no contemporary British poets at all, instead proposing: 'In the twentieth century, the British engagement with the classical tradition was representative

⁵ Ziolkowski (1993), 99-145 and 146-93.

⁶ Briggs (2010), 292.

of the west as a whole rather than being tinged with local color'.⁷ In Karl Kirchwey's essay 'Vergil's *Aeneid* and Contemporary Poetry', he devotes sections to the historical context and close reading of the work of five American poets (Robert Lowell, Allen Tate, Rosanna Warren, Louise Glück and Mark Strand), and only one British poet (W.H. Auden) and one Irish poet (Eavan Boland).⁸ Finally, in the collection of essays *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, chapters on the place of Homer and Virgil among recent poets combine to discuss five British poets, one New Zealander, three Irish poets – and 12 Americans.⁹ This general implication that modern responses in poetry to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* were especially prevalent in the United States, has been confirmed and made concrete by my own research over the past four years.¹⁰

Mapping American Receptions

It is the aim of this project to account for the unusual proliferation of receptions of Homer and Virgil in American poetry of the twentieth century. This goal takes as its jumping off point the many recent essays and book chapters mentioned above, as well as similar works by Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts (2002), Oliver Taplin (2002), Richard Thomas (2006), Lillian E. Doherty (2009) and Lorna Hardwick (2011), all of which explore with nuance and precision the invocation, translation and appropriation of Homeric-Virgilian epic by modern or contemporary poets. Taken together, these publications strike me as marking the tip of the iceberg, suggesting that a widespread phenomenon may have occurred, but not yet exploring its origins or results on a deeper or comprehensive level. My thesis

⁷ Jenkyns (2010), 278.

⁸ Kirchwey (2010).

⁹ These chapters are Longley (2009), Taplin (2009), Fowler (2009) and Hurst (2009). This example cuts against the grain of the question of whether scholarship by Americans focuses disproportionately on American poets, since the authors of this volume are British.

¹⁰ There are certainly many interesting and prominent British, Irish, Canadian, Caribbean, Australian and New Zealand poetic receptions of Homer and Virgil in the twentieth century, just not in the same numbers as the American versions. My proposed reasons for this will become clear in the course of this introduction. For recent scholarship on modern, non-American poetic versions of Homer and Virgil in the English language, see e.g. Hardwick (2007), Greenwood (2007), Taplin (2007), Cox (2011) and Parker (2013).

attempts to explore this question in an immersive way, considering on both broad and specific axes the historical and cultural conditions that might have shaped the phenomenon of modern American poets interpreting the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* in new poetic versions on a widespread scale.

The historical context of my research continues the story begun by Caroline Winterer in her books on the significance of Classics in American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *The Culture of Classicism: ancient Greece and Rome in American intellectual life, 1780-1910*, Winterer recounts a new use for the classics that developed in the United States in the antebellum period: an escape into ‘antimodernism’. She writes:

Rather than looking to antiquity as a guide to the present, [Americans] now looked to the remote past as a way to combat such cancers of modernity as materialism, civic decay, industrialization, and anti-intellectualism. The new way of reading texts in the classical classroom was a way for students to enter fully into the classical past, to shed their modernity and imbibe the purifying, ennobling spirit of antiquity.¹¹

This outlook determined the positioning of Greek and Latin as the core of the American undergraduate curriculum in the nineteenth century, and was expanded in the early twentieth century to justify the value of formal academic study in general, a philosophy that has underpinned the American liberal arts system ever since. In *The Mirror of Antiquity: American women and the classical tradition, 1750-1900*, Winterer outlines the classical exempla by which early generations of elite American women were able ‘to imagine and to articulate new roles for themselves’,¹² and thus grasp and wield the cultural capital of classicism, ‘at a time when it was the central political, artistic, and intellectual conversation of the nation’, to secure a voice in social and political spheres.¹³

My thesis starts where Winterer’s work ends, at the point in American history where the prevalence and perceived value of Classics had become circumscribed within an educational context, supposedly serving to cultivate utmost intellectual and moral capacities in students, but no longer providing the terms and imagery for any major civic function in American life (like politics, abolitionism or women’s suffrage), as it had in the past. Even

¹¹ Winterer (2002), 4.

¹² Winterer (2007), 4.

¹³ Winterer (2007), 5.

within the universities, the inviolable importance of Classics was coming up against strong criticism for the first time. In her epilogue to *The Culture of Classicism*, Winterer observes:

The Victorian notion of classical antiquity as uniquely cultivating has been unable to weather the general trend of twentieth-century education, which is toward ever more egalitarianism. This is a radical simplification, of course [...] but there is clearly a fundamental incompatibility between the egalitarian ethos of the twentieth-century university and the elitism traditionally associated with classicism.¹⁴

Through attempts to resolve this impasse between the elitist purity of classical literature prized in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the U.S., and the increasingly progressive inclusivity of the nation and its universities as the twentieth century unfolded, a new stage of Classics in American education organically took shape. Marked by a decline in the formal study of Greek and Latin, this period saw the rise of an interdisciplinary core curriculum to replace it, which exposed large numbers of students to the ‘great books’ of Western literature all together, including the works of classical antiquity in translation.¹⁵ This decontextualising academic climate was one of the foundations for the poetic versions of Homer and Virgil that began to emerge at the advent of Modernism in World War I, and which multiplied into a huge phenomenon by mid-century. Its impact will be explored in full in the first chapter of this thesis.¹⁶

My main arguments for this project fit beneath the umbrella of Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood’s proposition in their introduction to *Homer in the Twentieth Century*:

This book examines the place of Homer in the last century by focusing on some fundamental issues which shaped both creative and scholarly approaches to Homeric epic, but which have, so far, largely escaped critical enquiry. Our thesis is that shifts in the academic study of Homeric epic were part of a much broader re-positioning of Homer in the cultural landscape of the twentieth century.¹⁷

¹⁴ Winterer (2002), 179.

¹⁵ Schein (2007) estimates that over 100,000 U.S. undergraduates have read Homer in translation every year in these ‘great books’ courses, since they were first implemented in the early twentieth century. In addition, he suggests that ‘another 150,000-200,000 students per year read all or parts of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* or both epics in high school or college courses in Mythology or Classical Literature’ (268). Therefore, as Schein notes, ‘there probably have been more readers of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in undergraduate humanities and great books courses in the United States since the 1920s than in the 500+ years since the first printed editions of the Homeric epics’ (268). I would add that, since the courses usually have included excerpts from the *Aeneid* as well, the same statistics likely apply to American students’ exposure to Virgil in translation.

¹⁶ See Chapter 1, ‘Epic Insight: Classical Education and the Immanent Self’.

¹⁷ Graziosi & Greenwood (2007), 3.

That collection of essays discusses, as such ‘fundamental issues’, the new understanding in the past century of the orality of the Homeric poems, and the doubts and insights sparked by the subsequent analogy between Homer and other non-Western epic traditions. However, the forces of history and culture charted in my work are likewise fundamental to the shifting place of ancient epic in the modern world. In the pages that follow, Modernism, American humanism, Freudianism and related psychologies and second-wave feminism, among other categories of thought, will all be scrutinised in their relation to the reception of Homer and Virgil in the American ‘cultural landscape of the twentieth century’. All of these cultural-historical tides contributed to the ‘re-positioning’ of Homer and Virgil during this period, and all of them ‘shaped both creative and scholarly approaches’ to epic. By impacting the treatment of ancient epic in undergraduate classrooms, these movements crucially determined the types of poetic response envisioned later, by future poets exposed to these certain approaches at university. Of course the cultural forces that directed teaching and scholarship practices also touched professors and students in their lives in general, beyond formal education; thus the impact on the interpretation of Homer and Virgil of the cultural waves discussed in this thesis, especially those of Modernism and American humanism, flowed strongly in multiple directions.

In the space created among these secondary sources, my research took shape, beginning with a catalogue of modern American poetic receptions of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. This is shown in the ‘Descriptive Catalogue’ appended to this thesis, ‘References to Homer and Virgil in American Poems Since 1914’. In compiling this list, I set out to locate ‘versions’ of Homer and Virgil from the twentieth century, in which a direct ‘reference’ in the poem, to some aspect of the ancient epics, signals a return to the original text or myth, which completes or expands the meaning of the new version.¹⁸ These poems are not full

¹⁸ This term ‘reference’ comes from Thomas (1999), 114-41. Such signals pointing readers to an intertextual source have traditionally been called ‘allusions’ (see Pucci (1998): ‘I use the term allusion [...] to designate literary borrowing, by which I mean the use in a newer literary work of older material from a prior literary work. Other terms have been suggested – echo, reminiscence, quotation, imitation, intertext, etc. – but only allusion has been used consistently in the Western tradition to designate this phenomenon’ (4)); but ultimately I found that term to be a bit high-flown for the very simple references

‘adaptations’ (which Linda Hutcheon defines ‘as an extended, deliberate, announced revisitiation of a particular work of art’),¹⁹ because they focus on small excerpts from the original work, and veer quite far away from the epic limits into tangential, personal territory; but neither are they formless wanderings in a vague or unconscious classicism. They all flag their intertextual, or inter-imaginative, relation to Homer and Virgil with clear allusive signposts, and work within a modified understanding of genre, oscillating between conventions of epic and lyric.²⁰ Some of the references are straightforward or contained. Others extend in an allusive system deeply into the poem, or even beyond the single poem into the poet’s wider corpus.²¹ Many of the references are obviously textual, referring either to the original Greek or Latin poetry, or to a well-known English translation; however, some are more general, invoking impressions of the epics of Homer and Virgil from the common imagination, as mythological plot, character or theme; and I believe that these receptions are equally valid and important for understanding the place of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* within modern literature. As Derek Walcott observed in 1995:

What we have because of Homer – permanently because of Homer (and without having read the book, already knowing that there is such a figure) – are two emblems, at least. One is The Most Beautiful Woman in the World: Helen [...]. The other emblem, of course, is The Moving Sail, alone on the ocean, not a ship but something small on a large expanse of water, trying to get somewhere – the image of the wanderer (call him Odysseus) made emblematic by the great poet.²²

These ‘permanent’ inheritances from Homer and Virgil are accessible to artists and thinkers regardless of their familiarity with the actual texts, and still contribute to the reception history of the epics, since the ‘emblems’ arose from that source in the first instance, and will always, inevitably stand in relation to it, as variations on a distant, original theme.

My cataloguing method unfolded as an expanding web, with the list radiating

to Homer or Virgil, Odysseus or Circe, that often appear in American poems of the twentieth century, not initiating a close dialogue between texts, but rather calling on general ideas about human nature and accomplishment, of which the epic poet or character is a symbol.

¹⁹ Hutcheon (2006), 170.

²⁰ On which, see the later section of this introduction, ‘Between Epic and Lyric: Dialectics of Genre’.

²¹ See, for instance, the stunning motif of the drowned sailor in the work of W.S. Merwin, which begins with a reference to Palinurus in ‘The Bones of Palinurus Pray to the North Star’ (1952), and extends to twenty-seven other poems in the poet’s early career (Merwin (1975)).

²² This remark is from a talk the poet delivered at Duke University in 1995 (Walcott (1997), 235, quoted in Davis (2007), 207-8).

outward from initial hubs in anthologies by George Steiner (1996), Deborah DeNicola (1999) and Nina Kossman (2001), in the dictionary of receptions by Jane Davidson Reid (1993), and in the many recent publications on the reception of epic already cited. When I found one reference to Homer or Virgil in the work of a certain poet, I combed through the rest of that poet's output, often discovering several more epic-related poems. My historical, contextual research yielded further examples, mentioned in biographies and criticism of the poets I was studying, and I continued to add to the catalogue throughout the entire course of this project.

The result has provided the foundation for my work of reception history, illustrating on a large scale the range of ways in which American poets of the twentieth century responded to the epics of Homer and Virgil. By basing my study on this original catalogue of almost 400 poems from over 175 different poets, written in the U.S. between 1914 and 2014, I have been able to observe at first hand, and from a wide angle, the 'convergences and divergences' among these modern American receptions of ancient epic,²³ and separate out the threads of historical and cultural context that likely shaped and determined various qualities of this substantial body of poems. It is not an exhaustive list or study, but rather representative of the types of epic dynamics and intersections that appear to have occurred during this period of American literary history. Of course the trends of approach among the poems of my catalogue were executed with varying degrees of success, imagination and skill, but it is still striking the extent to which this catalogue combines high levels of both incidence and quality. Many of the poets represented are the major American poets of the twentieth century (including Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Pinsky, Louise Glück, Jorie Graham), and many of their receptions of Homer and Virgil are among their greatest works. The shared qualities among these versions of epic overarch the differences that divide them into the chapters that follow in this thesis. The chapters will discover the differences; this introduction highlights the similarities.

First of all, the poems in the catalogue were written by highly educated poets, mostly from the Northeast and Midwest in the U.S. (though in good numbers from the West coast

²³ Taplin (2009).

and the South, as well), and from all different racial, religious, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (though apparently white and middle-class, above all). By far the most common thread among this body of poets is a connection to an elite American college or university, and exposure to its undergraduate courses, either as a student or as a teacher.²⁴ As Hainsworth observed in *The Idea of Epic*, ‘the classical epic, apart from its two Homeric progenitors, was a sentimental genre, a conscious preservation or re-creation in a literary environment of a form that had once emerged in a natural way. The neoclassical epic of the Renaissance was doubly sentimental: it re-created Virgil as Virgil had re-created Homer’,²⁵ so it would make sense that the artificial exposure necessary for poets to decide to recreate Homer and Virgil in a new modern light occurred overwhelmingly in a conscious, educational environment. These poets probably saw themselves, like T.S. Eliot in E. Porges Watson’s view, as ‘belonging to a cultural rather than to any national tradition’,²⁶ but ironically still managed to create something of a national phenomenon, due to their widespread exposure to epic on both sides of the undergraduate classroom.

There are almost exactly twice as many male poets as female represented in the catalogue. This could be due to the centuries-long slant toward masculine dominance in poetry in general, both as writers and publishers, or to more limited access to elite undergraduate education, which excluded women for much of the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, reducing future female poets’ exposure to the potential inspiration of Homer and Virgil. The poets listed in my catalogue represent many different literary schools and styles, including the early Modernists, the Southern Agrarians, the post-war Formalists, the Confessional poets, the post-war *avant-garde*, the High Modernists, the Black Mountain poets, the Deep Image movement and the post-Confessionals. Most of these groups can be traced back to Modernism as heirs, and this is the second most prevalent quality among poets

²⁴ Once I realised this connection, my definition of ‘modern American poets’ expanded a bit, to include a few foreign-born poets who spent significant or formative portions of their lives or careers connected to American undergraduate institutions, and whose major receptions of epic occurred after the time of their expatriation and exposure to the American education system, e.g. Thom Gunn and Olga Broumas.

²⁵ Hainsworth (1991), 146.

²⁶ Watson (1986), 118.

in my catalogue. Furthermore, many of the poems occur among smaller groups of friends and colleagues. As Guy Davenport reflected:

As a youngster I came to the classics simply by following the clues of other writers. Cooper, Stevenson, Whitman, even Edgar Rice Burroughs seemed to lead, allusion by allusion, back to a body of writing that was solider and wiser, some spirit that didn't wobble, wasn't under argument as to its validity, and shone with its own light. I have found this convergence to be a permanent force in all my reading; it is scarcely surprising that my thought has followed the pattern. I wonder if there is another pattern to follow.²⁷

Perhaps due to poets following this pattern back to the source, friends and mentors who wrote receptions of Homer and Virgil seemingly sparked off chains of new versions among their peers and protégées, for instance Mark van Doren, a professor at Columbia, many of whose students also appear in the catalogue.

The *Odyssey* received the most attention in new versions, followed by the *Iliad*, and then the *Aeneid*. The *Odyssey* has generally been agreed to appeal to twentieth-century readers and artists the most, due to its interpersonal, seemingly modern themes. Other distinctions between the ways modern poets utilised the three separate epics in their new versions will emerge over the course of the thesis. For now, it is interesting to note the parallels. Spikes in the poetic reception of all three epics occurred concurrently. In the 1920s, many new versions appeared at once, perhaps due to the advent of psychology, with its interest in archetypes from myth, and the prominence of Ezra Pound's lyric sequence *The Cantos* (the first parts of which were published in 1922), which emphasised the figure of Odysseus centrally in the design of the poem, including in the very first episode. In the 1950s, an explosion of receptions occurred, at the height of the undergraduate translation courses. In the 1980s, another increase in epic-inspired poems appeared, perhaps as a result of feminist attention to revisionist mythmaking. These trends lead me to conclude that the same forces shaped the reception of Homer and Virgil equally, and that all three epics were considered of a piece, due to educational and cultural influences.²⁸

²⁷ Davenport in Auden et al. (1964), 42.

²⁸ This equal treatment also makes sense in terms of ancient literary history, given the conscious identity of Virgil's *Aeneid* as a synthesis and heightening of Homer's two epics. As A. Parry (1963) observed succinctly: 'We know from the first line that [Aeneas] is cast in the role of Achilles and Odysseus:

Arms and the man I sing...

Finally, the poems in the catalogue are overwhelmingly short. For every full-length or extended American reception drawing on the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* or *Aeneid* since the advent of Modernism around 1914, dozens of short versions appeared. Although some of the most well known versions are longer (for instance, *The Cantos*, *The Waste Land*, *Helen in Egypt*, *The Bridge* and *The Changing Light at Sandover*), and reflect a full and memorable epic ambition that is not present to the same degree in most of the shorter versions,²⁹ the vast majority of poems gathered in my research are brief in length, often no more than a page or two, with short, lyric-like lines.³⁰

In addition, it was important for me to decipher the boundary between extended poems written in the tradition of the American long poem (which includes Whitman, Longfellow and the Modernist collage poem) but which make no reference to ancient epic, and those that trace their lineage, perhaps through intervening modern versions, ultimately back to Homer or Virgil. As Lynn Keller rightly concluded in her book about contemporary American long poems by women: ‘The number of long poems that can appropriately be discussed in terms of epic is quite limited’.³¹ These non-epic long poems are not included in my catalogue or chapters about American epic receptions. Likewise there is a boundary separating out versions that belong to the long nineteenth century (even if they were written or published in the twentieth century). These poems referring to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* or *Aeneid* feature Victorian diction, meter and rhyme, as well as little awareness of the disillusionment and uncertainty that began to feature in Modernist poems after World War I, including the receptions of epic considered in this thesis, which belong to the long Modernist period, from about 1914 to the late twentieth century, with remnants even in present poetic practice.

The poets of this thesis shorten the epics of Homer and Virgil in various ways, for

The *arms* are of course the *Iliad*, the *man* is the *Odyssey*. And the first six books of the *Aeneid* retrace the wanderings of Odysseus, the wars of the last six books follow the example of the *Iliad*’ (71).

²⁹ See Tucker (2008): ‘No mere count of lines or pages can decide when an epic scope has been attained or even – since in this matter it is sometimes right to take the wish for the deed – whole-mindedly aspired to’ (16).

³⁰ See, again, Tucker (2008): ‘The promise of epic scale is also made literally visible along linear and spatial dimensions; that the poetic line should be long and the page full was a serious matter’ (16).

³¹ Keller (1997), 8.

strong personal and political reasons that will become clear in the pages that follow. I have come to think of these poems as ‘reductions’ of epic. The mechanisms of reduction are various, and will be demonstrated in the thesis chapters, but all of the poems either distil or truncate the original epics in some way, so this term encompasses both ends of the spectrum of appropriation.³² In these modern versions, the epics of Homer and Virgil are at times reduced to their ‘essence’ in the search for stable meaning, and at other times excerpted, simplified or dismantled as needed for pressing poetic and cultural purposes. This mechanism of epic reduction is arguably the principal mode of relation to classical epic in modern poetry.

Modernist Poetics: Images, Fragments and Epic Pieces

The reduced, short quality of most receptions in my catalogue can be explained as arising from the intersection of two major cultural threads of the twentieth century: Modernism, and American humanism. This section will explore the possible weight of Modernist poetics in determining the concision of the majority of modern American versions of Homer and Virgil. Modernism was an aesthetic response to the realities of modernisation after the turn of the twentieth century, and the shocking disillusionment of World War I, with its colossal and inhuman horrors. It was concerned above all with securing a new ground for meaning and reality, in a world that had begun to appear tenuous and chaotic. George Steiner writes of this collapse: ‘In the early twentieth century a more certain sense of disintegration followed the indiscriminate slaughter of the First World War. It was obvious that the old certainties had been illusions’.³³ Favoured sites for experiments in grounding, in the search for new, more stable meaning, included the subjective self or artist, and the ancient past. Although the boundaries of the movement are debated, Modernism ‘remains more a cultural

³² The idea that modern American authors approached Classics from a ‘proprietary’ stance comes from Ziolkowski (1993), 154; the sense that ‘appropriation’ is the contemporary spirit of reception is stated in Harrison (2009), 15.

³³ Steiner (2010), 262. Cf. Johnson (1982): ‘The fact of culture in its disintegrations and the self in its fragmentations (or, more precisely, in their dynamic changes) is incontestable in modern times’ (11).

field than a historical period'.³⁴ I understand it to stretch from around the start of World War I in 1914, through the 'High Modernism' of the 1950s and 1960s, and up until some muted but lingering incarnations in the present day (for instance the high, distilled lyric poems of Louise Glück, or the wide-ranging lyric sequences of Robert Pinsky). Beginning as a small revolution against nineteenth-century strictures, it became an exploding force in art, literature and culture, undermining, cracking open and shattering into fragments the semblances of stability from the recent past. Modernism had an irreversible effect on the interpretation of Homer and Virgil in particular, famously due to its innovative use of ancient epic as a scaffold for artistic attempts to stabilise an unstable modern reality;³⁵ but also, I propose, for the creative insight it encouraged into the fragmented side of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, the hushed disillusionment and tenuous construction that might at any moment crumble into pieces.³⁶

The predominant shortness of poetic receptions of Homer and Virgil in the United States since about 1914 resulted in large part, I believe, from the Modernist interest in brevity. This focus appeared in several areas within Modernism. First of all, a small group of leading poets, including Ezra Pound and H.D., developed a new poetic technique called Imagism. In light of growing awareness of the limitations and potential ungroundedness or impossibility of language, this approach attempted to distil an idea or image down into its bare essence, stripping away all superfluous speech, and thus forcing the remaining words to correspond exactly to the reality, if only for a split second before slipping off again. As Rainer Emig phrased it: 'The underlying motivation of Imagism's poetics of austerity is its attempt to force language to be referential. Imagism cannot accept the basic arbitrariness of language'.³⁷ Although the official affiliation of poets with Imagism was short-lived, the ideal of spare,

³⁴ Dinerstein (2008), 198.

³⁵ The famous statement about this is Eliot (1923), on James Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* as a structural model for his novel *Ulysses*.

³⁶ Cf. Steiner (2010): 'It is a fine circumstance that epic, which began as poetry stitched together from inherited materials handed down from a heroic age, should return to its roots, but this time by stitching together random evidences of a broken world' (262), or coming apart again, into the pieces that appear in and as modern poetic receptions.

³⁷ Emig (1998), 186.

essential, reduced verse remained,³⁸ and perhaps influenced the brief nature of many twentieth-century American versions of Homer and Virgil.

The short poems might also have been determined by the modernist awareness of fragments, which became ‘a metaphor of the period’.³⁹ Poetry in general reflected the sense of the splintering of history felt at that time, both mentioning the remaining, fragmentary debris outright, and also depicting it with multi-vocal, disconnected and unfinished lines and sections. As Joel Dinerstein explains: ‘Because the modern self has been battered and moved about, modern artists and writers break words and images into fragments (Cubism, *The Waste Land*), creating art and literature that demand constant attention to produce coherence’.⁴⁰ The most famous example of this is indeed T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), in which a defining line, from the disintegrating section ‘What the Thunder Said’, reads: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’. The idea of gathering up parts, pieces and shards of dismantled, past history and literature ‘against ruin’, as solace or recourse in a barren, broken world, might have sparked modern poets’ focus on the salvageable parts of Homer and Virgil, the episodes, speeches, similes and other contained moments that could survive excision, and around which many short receptions in my catalogue appear to be based.

The modern focus on speed could furthermore have encouraged short versions. The ‘so-called “speed-up” of modern life’ occurred in reference to ‘fast, impersonal transportation networks (rail, auto, air), to communication networks that separated the message from the sender (telegraph, telephone), and to new visual regimes rendered through film, aerial perspectives, or abstract art’.⁴¹ In addition, earlier generations and centuries of civilization processed art and meaning by listening, reading or writing; these habits were no longer as

³⁸ Rosenthal & Gall (1983) even described this as the major change in literature in the twentieth century: ‘As for “the genius of modern poetry”, we refer to the stripping-away process, or liberation of sensibility, that marks the evolution of modern art. We cannot attribute the process to any one person or movement; it is a cultural phenomenon, a reflex of deep historical change. [...] Ideas, dramatic situations, narrative suspense – these have by no means disappeared from poetry, any more than has the sonnet or iambic pentameter or any other mode developed in the past. All have their uses. But the real poem, its dynamics always active beneath the surface structure of poems in any age, has come into its own’ (17).

³⁹ F. Mactinosh, lecture on ‘Classics and Modernism’, Michaelmas Term 2010, in the Oxford Examination Schools.

⁴⁰ Dinerstein (2008), 202.

⁴¹ Dinerstein (2008), 202.

strong in the twentieth century. In the words of Hainsworth: ‘In those times society *listened*; in the twentieth century society *views*. In its capacity to create myths while entertaining and to reach whole peoples, the modern heroic medium is film’.⁴² Perhaps short poetry was more palatable to a modern audience gaining a taste for instantaneous, more effortless experience.⁴³

Even long versions of Homer and Virgil, for instance, the lengthier receptions by Ezra Pound, H.D., Hart Crane or James Merrill, were arguably steered by this Modernist focus on reduction. Susan Friedman suggested:

In response to the shattering events of the modern world, especially the Great War, these men [Pound, Williams and Eliot] wrote poems whose language still reflected Imagism, but whose cosmic sweep of history, culture, and myth evoked the epic tradition. *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Paterson* [by Williams Carlos Williams] disrupt space and time in their broken quest narratives. They fragment the identities of their heroes, whose failures and sterility are an ironic echo of the traditional hero's integrated identity and capacity both to lead and to embody his people. They articulate the dissolution of traditional symbolic systems as their inadequate poetic personae attempt to create new mythic meanings out of the broken shards of the old systems.⁴⁴

Although such disrupted ‘epic’ poems are technically long, they are actually comprised of short pieces – fleeting moments of clarity, or extracts from world literature, strung tenuously together. In addition to fragmenting ‘the traditional hero’s integrated identity’, these poets literally fragment the original epic texts to which they refer, by quoting them piecemeal, and by replacing them with their own new, decentred version of epic for modern times. The frayed edges of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* are one example. The resulting art becomes the ‘modern sequence’, on the epic spectrum but irrevocably reduced:

The modern sequence, then, is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope.⁴⁵

⁴² Hainsworth (1991), 148.

⁴³ The living poet Jorie Graham raises the darker side of this new, short attention span of the past century: ‘More and more poetry is being written to satisfy that need for instant gratification, or, conversely, to elude the reader completely, in order to resist that need, on political grounds. I am most certainly not doing the latter. And no one could accuse me of doing the former. Fast seizures are dangerous. Look at what digital cameras are doing to the mind of our crazed children in Iraq, or anywhere they have the means to produce the narcotizingly speedy thrills, or understandings – which make the terrified and bored human psyche feel “powerful” of course – whether it’s a weapon, a camera, or a reading glance – anywhere on this planet. It’s a moral catastrophe born of many things – technology is certainly one of the components’ (Graham, ‘Q&A’).

⁴⁴ Friedman (1972), 213.

⁴⁵ Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 9.

It would have been difficult, in a literary climate such as this, for other modern poets not to notice the short, scattered quality within these prominent long versions of epic, and perhaps also, by extension, the fragmented possibilities within the source texts of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. Edgar Allan Poe observed that any longer poem is made up of ‘centers of intensity’:⁴⁶ ‘What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects’, episodes of ‘excitement’ linked by less stimulating passages that are ‘essentially prose’.⁴⁷ Of course Virgil condensed Homer in his initial act of reception, in part cutting out the elements that might have been considered overlong or repetitive.⁴⁸ Without wishing to succumb to the trap of finding all modern interpretations ‘already present’ in the original classical text,⁴⁹ I might at least observe that the Modernist focus on textual pieces had plenty to notice and reinterpret in the work of Homer and Virgil.

Finally, poets exposed to modern realities and Modernist poetics might have read for the splintered and disillusioned angle within the ancient narrative voice, the fact that the original epics were perhaps not always unified or consistent in their perspectives or seeming beliefs. In his introduction to *Virgil and the Moderns*, Ziolkowski observed:

The 1882 commemorations [in Italy, of the 19th centenary of Virgil’s death,] seemed to bear out Robert Graves’s thesis that ‘whenever a golden age of stable government, full churches, and expanding wealth dawns among the Western nations, Virgil always returns to supreme favour’. In the twentieth century, however, it was precisely the troubled era *entre deux guerres* that sent scholars, writers, and readers back to the Roman poet who seemed to have anticipated so much of the turmoil of our times.⁵⁰

Although Ziolkowski went on to argue that modern audiences appropriated the stability and

⁴⁶ Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 6.

⁴⁷ Originally in J.A. Harrison (ed.) (1902) *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* XIV, 195-6, quoted in Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 6.

⁴⁸ Hainsworth (1991) commented: ‘What Virgil created was a careful mosaic of Homeric elements, mingled, adapted, and transformed’ (101), and also, ‘the design of the *Aeneid* selects and condenses the best Homeric scenes and avoids the repetitions’ (102).

⁴⁹ On which see Fowler (1997): ‘Our criticism will tend to be framed in terms of the later passages “bringing out” something which was already “there” in the *Aeneid*, rather than in terms of the inevitable traces that the revival of interest in Lucan and the Flavians leaves in modern readings of Vergil. If we locate intertextuality, however, not in any pre-existing textual system but in the reader, there is no reason to feel that it is in some way improper to acknowledge that for most professional classicists today there *are* now traces of Lucan in Vergil, just as our Homer can only ever now be Vergilian’ (130).

⁵⁰ Ziolkowski (1993), 6, quoting R. Graves (1962) ‘The Virgil Cult’ *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 38, 13.

hopefulness found in Virgil to strengthen their own work and lives,⁵¹ the opposite is also true: that turning to Virgil ‘in troubled times’ opened up a new, ‘pessimistic’ reading of the Latin text for the modernist century. Consider, for instance, this quotation from Adam Parry, in a prominent essay construing the *Aeneid* as an expression of, above all, ‘not a sense of triumph, but a sense of loss’:⁵²

Let us now consider the poem from a wider point of view. Here we take care not to let orthodox interpretations of the *Aeneid* obscure our sense of what it really is. The nostalgia for the heroic and Latin past, the pervasive sadness, the regretful sense of the limitations of human action in a world where you've got to end up on the right side or perish, the frequent elegiac note so apparently uncalled for in a panegyric of Roman greatness, like the passage at the end of book 5 which describes the drowning of the good pilot Palinurus in dark and forgetful waters just before the Trojans reach Italy, the continual opposition of a personal voice which comes to us as if it were Virgil's own to the public voice of Roman success: all this I think is felt by every attentive reader of the poem.⁵³

Such proposed awareness of the ‘darkness’ in Virgil became an influential trend in academia in the mid-century, ‘the so-called “Harvard School”’ of criticism in the U.S.,⁵⁴ which focused on drawing out the aspects of the text that seemingly disclose the poet’s conflicted feelings about his subject matter: the thought that Virgil ‘realiz[ed] the violations of personal integrity which necessarily follow in the wake of empire’.⁵⁵ In terms of historical context, ‘the doubt of the traditional view of the *Aeneid* has at least some connection with the 1960s questioning of all institutions, political, religious, and intellectual, and in particular with attitudes towards America’s own imperialism’.⁵⁶ It is evident from the poems in my catalogue that this sceptical angle affected artistic receptions just as much as scholarship, creating a point of entry for poets into found or imagined disillusionment, the pain and personal aspects of the ancient

⁵¹ E.g. Ziolkowski (1993) in his preface: ‘What began as a purely literary project – an exercise in literary reception and cultural continuity – turned out to have significant political implications. It soon became apparent that the writers and cultural critics who turned to Virgil did so not merely or even primarily for “literary” reasons but because they saw in his works, along with a profound insight into the ambivalence of human nature and its history, a set of values and an image of security that they missed in a world transformed by World War I. At the same time, they recognized in his life a model of dignified survival in the face of social disorder and political turmoil that provided a certain strength for their own lives in troubled times’ (x-xi).

⁵² Parry (1963), 70.

⁵³ Parry (1963), 69.

⁵⁴ Harrison (1990), 5. On this style and period of scholarship, see Harrison (1990), 5-7. Major examples include Brooks (1953), Parry (1963), Clausen (1964) and Putnam (1965). Hints of this view persisted late into the twentieth century, e.g. Hainsworth (1991): ‘The poet of a literary epic is not the anonymous spokesman for his epic, and he cannot help but add a private note to his public voice’ (10).

⁵⁵ Putnam (1965), xiii.

⁵⁶ Harrison (1990), 5.

stories, which became the basis for new, very modern versions probing ‘the loss, the frustration, the sense of the insubstantiality of what could be palpable and satisfying’ in the world,⁵⁷ then and now.

On the new primacy of the *Aeneid* in general, in this dark, modernist period, George Steiner writes:

The generation just ahead of mine in the Lycée was committed to Homer as against Virgil. Every bright child could tell you that Virgil was a bore, a court poet trying to ape the lion’s stride. Simone Weil’s wrong-headed but moving essay on the *Iliad* belongs distinctly to that period. As many of us became refugees, scattered suddenly and trying to find precarious haven, the *Aeneid* swung tremendously into focus. It now seemed the more responsible vision, precisely because it was muted, because there is in it a greyness of afternoon. The *Aeneid* is the epic of the displaced person, expressive of the cruel fact that remembrance is a necessary hurt.⁵⁸

In this cultural-historical light, it is possible to wonder if scholarly and artistic approaches to the ‘shadow’ aspects of Virgil might have inspired a similar, more ambiguous interpretation of Homer during the same period, especially since all three epics were considered in parallel in formative university translation courses. The simultaneous spikes in my catalogue in the 1960s (the height of ‘pessimistic’ scholarship on Virgil), of new poems highlighting the conflicted, fragmented aspects of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, alongside the *Aeneid*, appear to confirm this impression, that the poetic reception of Homer might have been swayed by the reception of Virgil in the twentieth century. This mediation continues a centuries-long dynamic. In T.S. Eliot’s expression: ‘The blood-stream of European literature is Latin and Greek – not as two streams of circulation, but one, for it is through Rome that our parentage in Greece must be traced’.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Parry (1963), 71.

⁵⁸ Steiner in Auden et al. (1964), 82-3.

⁵⁹ Eliot (1944), 130.

The poems that resulted from this Modernist reduction of classical epic occupy the space between genres.⁶⁰ Receptions of Homer and Virgil by modern American poets are not fully epic, nor wholly lyric; rather, they oscillate in a dynamic tension between the two poles, as expanded lyric, or distilled epic. These short (or fragmented, even if they are occasionally longer) poems with epic themes encompass lyric conventions,⁶¹ opened up beyond the narrow bounds of isolated, inward focus, and simultaneously epic conventions, refined down into the most potent, powerful moments, with the wandering or impersonal parts discarded. I acknowledge that the term ‘lyric’ has certain associations in the field of classical studies;⁶² but I propose to accept and employ throughout this project its post-Romantic use in the study of English literature,⁶³ to refer to poems that are short, partial, private, inward and ‘feminine’, as distinguished from the long, teleological, public, outward and ‘masculine’ genre of epic.

The poems explored in this thesis have clear epic aims, especially to affect change in the world beyond the poem. Examples in my close readings, in the chapters to come, variously attempt to impress upon readers the devastations of war, to spark political convictions and changes of direction for the United States as a potentially ailing republic, to liberate and strengthen marginalized voices and demographic groups, and to establish poets’

⁶⁰ Harrison (2007) offers a definition of literary genre: ‘a form which can be identified through a particular generic repertoire of external and internal features’, that is, shared, customary elements of structure or content (10).

⁶¹ See Hardwick (2007) for citations of ‘recent research on the relationship between Homer and lyric, especially the affinities in register, metaphor, and form between Greek lyric and the embedded simile in ancient epic’ (55).

⁶² E.g. Graziosi & Haubold (2009) characterise the genre in this way: ‘A variety of very different poems, songs, recitations and dances constitute the modern category of “Greek lyric”: these performances were not necessarily thought to have much in common in the archaic period’ (95). In fact, they propose, ‘for the archaic period, lyric can almost be defined as non-epic poetry’ (96). By the twentieth century, lyric poetry was often thought of as ‘poetry’ in general, comprising the entire category in popular awareness.

⁶³ Silk (2009) writes about ‘the great Romantic revolution of sensibility and usage, whereby, from around the end of the eighteenth century, “lyric poetry” is associated distinctively with personal feeling, and the “lyric I” takes on a significance unforeseen in ancient Greece’ (374). He explains the full extent of this new inwardness: ‘In the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth offers a classic definition of poetry in Romantic terms. Poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”. Whose feelings? The poet’s. Without any reference to the world outside, whether as subject-matter or as audience, poetry is identified with its creative source, in the shape of the individual poet’s personal-emotional response to experience’ (375).

lasting fame as epic successors. These poems are active and striving, reaching out from the page for connection and progress. Even the versions that are more reserved or more self-involving are still about ‘self-in-the-world’.⁶⁴ The completely detached, isolated consciousness of the desolate modern lyric poems by Wallace Stevens or Sylvia Plath, for instance, does not appear among these epic receptions. The versions with a personal focus are still narrative at the same time,⁶⁵ with forward and outward movement being pursued, and usually achieved. In addition, they are ‘imbued with the true spirit of [their] age’,⁶⁶ reflecting on obvious levels the crisis of history, the new focus on psychological subjectivity, the political challenges, the social revolutions and the personal doubts and ambitions central to the twentieth-century moment of their production, and also exploring and questioning these issues, a self-examining project that has always been the domain of epic poetry.⁶⁷ Ezra Pound declared, ‘an epic cannot be written against the grain of its time’,⁶⁸ and these poems are patently historically embedded, representative of all the major concerns of the modern period.

The poems no less have lyric goals, of creating, clarifying or freeing the individual self, in a sudden, inward movement toward insight. In certain examples described in my thesis chapters, poets hold up aspects of the Homeric or Virgilian myth or text as a reflective surface. These scenes or characters from epic serve to show the essential lines of human flaws, hopes and feeling states, which can help the poet or reader openly illuminate her or his

⁶⁴ This term is from Friedman (1972): ‘In a climate where the epic and drama still reigned supreme with the lyric trailing not far behind, the novel was a more inviting genre for aspiring women writers. [...] The development of the British novel was closely tied to the changing status of women in general. Most of its early readers were women, a fact that helps account for the importance of the marriage plot, sexual politics, and intimate human relations in its conventions. Unlike both the epic and the lyric, the new genre focused on the self-in-the-world, the social and cultural contexts with which the developing self must interact’ (207). In this sense, epic-lyric receptions of Homer and Virgil are related to this foremost literary genre of modern times, the novel. Like the novel, these poems connect the individual with her or his social and historical surroundings; they are larger than the single poet, but still focalized distinctively through a plainly human voice, without the attempted impersonal objectivity of epic. Both genres (the novel, and this hybrid epic-lyric ‘genre’) face inward and outward at the same time, in a movement toward ‘collective self-understanding’ (Tucker (2008), 22).

⁶⁵ Tucker (2008): ‘Epic’s essential way of knowing is narrative; and the synchronic extension of reference that the simile and catalogue offer are ultimately supplements to the diachronic, diegetic carriage that makes an epic go’ (20).

⁶⁶ Hainsworth (1991), 141.

⁶⁷ Hainsworth (1991), 6.

⁶⁸ Pound (1910) continued, ‘the prophet or the satirist may hold himself aloof from his time, or run counter to it, but the writer of epos must voice the general heart’ (228), quoted in Friedman (1972), 204.

own depths and experiences, reflected back more clearly than before.⁶⁹ Other examples concentrate on the personal, lyric dimension of the original epic narratives, exploring the possible interior lives of the characters, whose emotions, fears and desires are imagined roiling beneath the surface of their traditional, fixed identities, and which again can implicitly illuminate universal experience.⁷⁰ Lyric moments of contemplation and flashes of clarity in the inner lives of Penelope, Odysseus, Circe, the Sirens and Achilles, all appear in the poems that follow in this thesis. As Susan Friedman explained about lyric, ‘its preeminent subject is feeling, not action’, and it ‘exists in a timeless present outside history’.⁷¹ Lyric receptions of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* bring epic into the stillness and transparency of the present moment,⁷² allowing life’s sediment to settle and its clear insights to shine through.

The restlessness of these poems, with energy shifting continuously between the lyric and epic poles, is itself very modern. The poems are without stable ground, experimenting in the Modernist fashion with creating meaning in open space, since certainty has been overturned by recent history.⁷³ In a way they are like an Imagist poem,⁷⁴ in which an ‘apparition’ of reality arises in the play between two imperfectly super-imposable fields (in the case of Imagism, the poet’s subjective experience and the language that attempts to capture it; in the case of these poems, the epic and lyric genres). The dynamic is dialectical,⁷⁵

⁶⁹ This image relates, perhaps, to C. Winterer’s book title *The Mirror of Antiquity* (2007), although in this case the symbols extracted from Homer and Virgil for this purpose are more like fragments or shards of a mirror; the epics are broken apart and then held up in small pieces – though even a small piece of a mirror still reflects fully and perfectly the scene before it.

⁷⁰ Skilful lyric poetry pursues introspection to its farthest limit, where it breaks through into the universal. As Edna Longley writes, ‘the drama of lyric poetry begins where the merely personal ends’ (from her preface to *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* (2001), quoted in Roberts (2013), 195).

⁷¹ Friedman (1972), 205.

⁷² In this regard, the poems are related to Michael Longley’s reception practice, of revealing the incredible, vivid quietness in the heart of the *Iliad*’s bluster: ‘From the outset, in my Homeric poems I pushed against the narrative momentum and “freeze-framed” passages to release their lyric potential’ (Longley (2009), 99).

⁷³ Cf. Emig (1998): ‘Modernism’s complementary tendencies of reduction and expansion are defensive responses to the loss of faith in mimesis. Language can no longer be trusted to relate to any given reality’ (185), thus plunging into miniature literary systems, or recoiling into sweeping worldviews occurred in alternation, searching for solid ground.

⁷⁴ E.g. Ezra Pound’s definitive Imagist poem ‘Apparuit’ (1912).

⁷⁵ The idea of a dialectic already existed in the history and criticism of the epic form, e.g. Hainsworth (1991): ‘The fact that there were two Homeric poems, and the difference in ethos between them, was vital for the future of the genre. Either by itself would have defined the genre for Greek literature, and there would have been no obvious direction in which to go. As it was, the idea of epic was elusive,

and the ceaseless oscillation between possible resting points explains the intense energy that a reader can sense contained within many of these apparently short, clear-cut poems. There is a long history of lyric rewriting of epic, with poets from Alcaeus to Tennyson miniaturising Homeric and Virgilian subjects in short versions; however, those past receptions seem to focus on formal variation, ludic allusion and the subtle pleasure or lesson of noticing the departures from the original source. They seem entirely more tranquil. The twentieth-century versions open themselves up more fully to the unsettling, uncontainable flux of modern reality, and could not be mistaken for classical or Victorian examples of epic reduction.

This generic dialectic was poised to overcome the limitations of both genres, against which poets and audiences were increasingly coming up short in the twentieth century. The blockages against epic and lyric were artistic, and also cultural. Lyric had become entrapping for the poet's psyche, and ineffectual in engaging with pressing world affairs. As Lynn Keller explained of the twentieth-century poetic landscape: '[The rise of long poems and lyric sequences] both may reflect dissatisfaction with the lyric as it is codified in contemporary practice – with its representing a single epiphanic moment, its reliance on a unified speaker, its imagistic coherence and tendency toward closure, its restricted intellectual or cultural range',⁷⁶ and W.R. Johnson summarised the ultimate dead-end of meaning that can afflict the lyric voice cut off from wider life: 'the ruin of lyric form unsentimentally observed: no one to sing, no one to sing to, nothing to sing'.⁷⁷ At the same time, epic was considered too daunting to attempt, and antiquated in its emotional detachment. As M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall put the matter:

[Lyric] sequences have been written in the spirit of our changed world, meeting the needs of sensibilities impatient with posturing and keyed to rigorous emotional accuracy. Of course it is sheer dogmatism to rule out any form or genre as obsolete ('the novel is dead'), and it is always possible that some genius will find a way of writing a long, continuous narrative poem or logically or thematically developed one that will satisfy the most knowledgeable and sensitized of contemporary readers. But a fatal ennui with such efforts does seem to have set

lurking somewhere behind the forms of the two. Clearly other kinds of epic were possible, and who could tell, it might be possible to combine in one the qualities of both exemplars' (42).

⁷⁶ Keller (1997), 22.

⁷⁷ Johnson (1982), 20. Cf. Nicholls (2013), 177: 'The insufficiency of lyric (to borrow a phrase from Donald Davie) lies, we might say, precisely in traditional assumptions of its self-sufficiency, of its capacity to constitute an autonomous, seductively suspended world', citing D. Davie (1986) *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric*.

in, and not even the gifts of a poet as truly remarkable as Wallace Stevens have been able to achieve more than a momentary, suspect remission.⁷⁸

Both forms were losing ground with audiences, in favour of the more 'modern' genre of the novel, and the more entertaining art form of film. Poetry at both ends of the spectrum of length and seriousness was 'in effect relegated to the cultural margins'.⁷⁹

By combining aspects of epic and lyric within the same poems, this dialectical approximation of genre opens up lyric to work in the world, and reduces epic to a modern possibility, perhaps thereby 'returning poetry to the cultural centrality that has slipped away with the rise of prose fiction',⁸⁰ among other causes. In the case of successful modernist versions of Homer and Virgil, the poems are no longer stifled by lyric isolation, nor overwhelmed by epic scope. (In the unsuccessful cases, however, the dialectic falls flat, and the poems are neither inwardly insightful, nor outwardly effective.) These afflictions of poetry and genre were likely common to many Western countries at the turn of the century,⁸¹ but the experimental solution of epic-lyric receptions of Classics appears to have been especially prominent in the United States. The works of Homer and Virgil were an obvious point of experiment for this practice, because myth itself is a dialectic, in dynamic tension with itself, connecting inner and outer poles of reality. As the poet Alicia Ostriker reflected:

All such material has double power. It exists or appears to exist objectively, outside the self. Because it is in the public domain, it confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes 'merely' of the private self. Myth belongs to 'high' culture and is handed 'down' through the ages by religious, literary, and educational authority. At the same time,

⁷⁸ Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 5-6. For comments on epic in the career of Wallace Stevens, see Chapter 6 of this thesis, 'Epic Anxiety: Rewriting Homer in One's Own Image'.

⁷⁹ Keller (1997), 306.

⁸⁰ Keller (1997), 306.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Harrison (2007), on 'the widespread notion that the traditional boundaries between genres, the demarcations which go back ultimately to the Aristotelian model [of epic, drama and lyric], have in some sense finally broken down or are the objects of continual interpenetration, that we are at the end of coherent generic history. This view is buttressed by the tendency of modern literary texts themselves to break down and subvert generic boundaries; hence the deconstructive inclination of much (post-)modern critical discourse to liberate texts from the hermeneutic restraints of classification. In its most extreme form, this can extend as far as Derrida's claim that generic systems are in effect meaningless in the analysis of modern literature' (11). The poems of this thesis have not yet reached this postmodern stage of subverting all possible generic designations, but rather are still in the modernist stage of hoping, of testing old models and flitting between them in an attempt to approximate, in the defined space between old solid genres, something sufficiently sound to represent modern reality. Time will tell if this Modernist experiment has resulted in true 'generic enrichment', which Harrison (2007) defines as 'generic development through generic interaction' (11), or whether it is simply a passing phenomenon of the twentieth century, with effects that stick to neither genre in the end.

myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation – everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable.⁸²

It is this ‘double power’ that I believe operates importantly in the poems of this thesis.

American Epic: Whitman, Humanism and the Undergraduate Translation Course

What makes poetic receptions of Homer and Virgil so widespread in the United States since 1914 is also part of what makes them dialectical in genre: the tradition of American humanism, in poetry and education, which produced a focus on locating aspects of the individual, lyric self in epic texts and contexts. Based on an optimistic belief in the value and grandeur of the human spirit, and a sense of the progress of Western civilization, from lowly origins to some future state of fulfilment, humanist philosophy was centrally involved in two aspects of American development that may have had an impact on the dominant lyric qualities of poetic receptions of epic in the twentieth century.

The first is the legacy of Walt Whitman, whose nineteenth-century humanist poem *Leaves of Grass* (1855) set a precedent in American literary history, for the insertion of the individual self into the centre of an epic framework. This famous poetic sequence, exalting in the dignity of being alive, transparently revised the full-length epic form to emanate from the lyric self, perhaps for the first time. As Rosenthal and Gall remarked: ‘[Book III,] *Song of Myself* [, ...] is the first poetic work of considerable length whose ordering is overwhelmingly lyrical. It is not bound by thematic, philosophical, or formal conventions’, but rather exhibits the spontaneity and ‘movement’ of inner life.⁸³ George Steiner calls Whitman’s work ‘capacious enough to “contain multitudes”’,⁸⁴ a poetic representation of the wide-ranging and distinctive personal imagination. The third book of the poem (‘*Song of Myself*’) begins, ‘I celebrate myself, and I sing myself’ – a bold, clear revision of Homer (‘Sing, goddess, of the

⁸² Ostriker (1986), 213.

⁸³ Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 16.

⁸⁴ Steiner (2010), 258.

anger of Achilles’; ‘Muse, tell me of a man, a man of much resource’) and Virgil (‘I sing of arms and of the man’),⁸⁵ which establishes the lyric ‘I’ as both source and subject of this work. Whitman as poet-persona is the self-authoring hero of his own tale, and the ‘epic’ meaning celebrated by the poem is merely the lyric moment of its own arising, created, not remembered, in the act of being written.⁸⁶

The significance of this work for American epic successors cannot be overstated. As Steiner observes, ‘the American epic tradition began in two long poems published in 1855’: Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, which explored the possibilities of ‘a personal testament set against the largeness of America, the record of an individual’s omnivorous experience, somewhat in the tradition of the growth of a poet’s soul in Dante or Wordsworth’; and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, which had an ‘anthropological intention’, ‘creating a tribal journey from innocence to experience, beginning in harmony and ending in the arrival of the missionaries and Hiawatha’s departure, a kind of inverted *Odyssey*’.⁸⁷ The propagation of the American long poem arguably departed from ‘these two epic impulses, on the one hand to chart the growth of a poet’s understanding and on the other to establish a distinctly American anthropological and historical record’.⁸⁸ The poems of this thesis belong clearly to the former line of ancestry, though perhaps combine both, as Whitman’s example itself does at points. For instance, Thomas Gardner, summarising James E. Miller’s conception of *Leaves of Grass* as a ‘personal epic’, explained the interrelation between self and historical environment that occurs in Whitman:

For Miller, Whitman’s model – one adopted by an impressively elaborated sequence of modern and contemporary poets – has two parts: Whitman’s work in creating a self-portrait

⁸⁵ Cf. Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 3. Translations from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* in this thesis are from the prose versions by Hammond (1987), Hammond (2000) and West (2003). I chose to quote from prose translations to avoid adding a third layer of poetry (in the form of modern verse translations of Homer or Virgil) to my comparative close readings of epic and its modern U.S. receptions.

⁸⁶ Keller (1997), quoting R.H. Pearce (1961), 61, 83, wrote: ‘[Pearce is] the first to propose a model of modified epic practice in which Whitman’s example is central. [...] The strategy of the American epic is “to make a poem which will create rather than celebrate a hero and which will make rather than recall the history that surrounds him”. [...] Whitman’s *Song of Myself* is Pearce’s key text initiating this new heroic poem “of ordering, not of order; of creation, not confirmation; of revealing, not memorializing”’ (7). As Keller observed in a footnote on Whitman, ‘the poet has become his own hero’ (311).

⁸⁷ Steiner (2010), 258.

⁸⁸ Steiner (2010), 258.

(‘personal’), and his attempt to understand that portrait as somehow representative of his age (‘epic’). There is a ‘central tension [that] is played out between the lyric (private) and epic (public) roles the poet has assigned himself’, in which, for the most part, the poet first establishes an image of himself and then moves on to explore its implications in the world at large. ‘The poet begins with himself, but ends with the world’.⁸⁹

This urge to illuminate the current cultural moment (epic) by drawing on the inner light of the poet or Homeric-Virgilian character (lyric) links back to the idea of dialectical genre, and appears strongly in the poems of my catalogue. Through Whitman, these epic and lyric drives were already joined in the historical awareness of American poets by the time the twentieth century began, thus allowing the combining of genres, in the search to understand self-in-the-world, to occur more readily and less self-consciously in the United States than elsewhere.

In addition to influencing the emergence of the modern epic tradition in Whitman, humanist thought participated significantly in the American education reforms of the early twentieth century. In response to the challenges posed to the classical university system by advancing scientific knowledge and vocational pressures, the liberal arts program emerged in the 1910s, attempting ‘to retrieve for the curriculum a function that it had sustained since the Middle Ages: the cultivation and transmission of the intellectual and philosophical inheritance of the Western world as an instrument of man’s understanding of himself’.⁹⁰ By advertising and emphasising the timeless merit of traditional academic studies in refining students’ character, American undergraduate arts degrees were able to retain a practical value in a society that might otherwise have abandoned them in favour of more utilitarian pursuits. As Frederick Rudolph recorded in his history of the U.S. undergraduate system, ‘one of the goals of general education listed in the 1944 Macalester College catalogue was “self-realization”’,⁹¹ and all manner of courses and subjects were shaped into channels toward that personal development.

One feature of this rejuvenated humanist curriculum was literature survey courses, which taught in translation the ‘great books’ of the Western world, including the *Iliad*,

⁸⁹ Gardner (1989), 3, quoting Miller (1979), 43, 123.

⁹⁰ Rudolph (1977), 237.

⁹¹ Rudolph (1977), 252. The other stated goals were “‘social competence, [...] cultivation of the arts of thinking and communication of ideas, acquaintance with the main fields of significant knowledge, and development of a Christian philosophy of life’”(252).

Odyssey and *Aeneid*, and in which most poets of my catalogue experienced Homer and Virgil.

The teaching philosophy underlying these courses was certainly humanist, encouraging a focus above all on the universal qualities of ancient texts, and on their personal relevance to the contemporary reader. Charles Martindale described this view of literature:

Two views about the significance of art are not infrequently set in opposition. The first ('humanistic') view is that such works are the vehicles of eternally valid truths and experiences (but it may be doubted whether such verities exist or, if they did, whether we could recognize them). The second is that these works are wholly or largely contingent on an original set of historical determinants (but against this clearly readers can both enjoy, and advance persuasive readings of, works about whose historical circumstances they know little, or nothing).⁹²

The translation courses subscribed to the first view in theory, an implicit slant that is evident in the choice to teach diverse literatures in excerpt, in comparison and in translation, offering a 'deconsecrated' version of works that would once have seemed pristine and untouchable.⁹³

Interestingly, the teaching in American undergraduate translation courses was overtly humanist in practice, as well. The classes often minimised contextualising material or discussion about the texts at hand, and explicitly encouraged the active use of ancient works to inform modern lives,⁹⁴ especially in classroom comments urging personal insight and action inspired by the Homeric-Virgilian epics.⁹⁵ Terry Eagleton summarises this philosophical approach: 'Liberal humanist critics are not merely out for a more complete account of literature: they wish to discuss literature in ways which will deepen, enrich and extend our lives'.⁹⁶ The same was true for liberal humanist educators in the United States in

⁹² Martindale (1993), 6.

⁹³ Harrison (2009) writes of 'the modern "deconsecration" of great poetic figures such as Homer and Virgil, in the sense of removing their cultural centrality as canonical and immutable texts generally known and read in their original languages', which created a permissive environment conducive to creative reception. In his words, 'poets can now safely appropriate what they need for their own work and their own contemporary concerns' (15).

⁹⁴ Seeing contemporary concerns clearly reflected in translated texts may have a theoretical cause or basis, e.g. Martindale (1993) on the three styles of translation: 'Metaphrase [...] tends to result in a process of making strange. By contrast paraphrase and imitation tend to elide any gap between past and present, and thus to stress continuity and similarity' (89). Furthermore, the act of reading itself produces an experience of personal involvement, e.g. Batstone (2006), quoting Gadamer (1976): '[Reception] occurs where the text and the reader meet and is simultaneously constitutive of both. [...] At the point of reception the text comes alive as the consciousness of the reader. In this way, "to understand what the work of art says to us is [...] a self-encounter"' (17).

⁹⁵ For examples of this phenomenon, see my first chapter, 'Epic Insight: Classical Education and the Immanent Self'. This is an example of the reception practice that Lianeri (2006) calls 'pragmatic appropriation that reduces the past to the norms and aims of a self-enclosed present' (144).

⁹⁶ Eagleton (2008), 183.

the twentieth century.

In this way, American humanism introduced an open, lyric element into the interpretation of a closed, epic genre, and perhaps predisposed poets to combine the two impulses formally in new versions. Where epic might have seemed inviolable and complete in previous periods or in other teaching contexts, when viewed through the lens of humanist education in the United States, the texts and myths were cracked open to admit experimentation, contemporary perspectives and personal needs into a previously closed world. The poems of the catalogue show above all a focus on the personal aspects of Homer and Virgil, both the ways in which the epics can reflect and illuminate the modern poet's life,⁹⁷ and the ways in which the texts might divulge the private experiences and perspectives of the original poets and characters.⁹⁸ Furthermore, many of the poets of this study not only made the epics about their own lives in proprietary new receptions, but also made the original poetry similar to their own poetry, rewriting, inducting or transposing the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* into their own particular poetic styles and programmes.⁹⁹ This highly personal approach to epic, on every level, is less prevalent among non-American versions in the twentieth century, because without the undergraduate translation courses, shaped by humanist concerns, the equation between the classical texts and individual concerns was not adopted as strongly. In fact, Richard Jenkyns implies that exactly the opposite was true in British consciousness, an impression of contrast between ancient world and modern self:

Throughout its history, Britain's outlook upon classical antiquity has been affected by its distinctive relationship to the Mediterranean world. Contrasts of climate, history, and culture differentiate the south of Europe from the north, and the massive barrier of the Alps has kept the British symbolically and practically separate. In addition, they have always been inevitably conscious that they live in an island, part of Europe but not part of the continent; and after the Reformation they were divorced confessionally from the Catholic south. All these things contributed to an idea of the classical world that often combined admiration with a sense of otherness.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ What W.B. Stanford (1954) called 'self-identification or self-discovery in Ulysses' or other characters (243).

⁹⁸ This is a reception practice that Stanford (1954) called 'ethical assimilation to contemporary conditions' of ancient characters (4), and it is studied in many of the close readings in the chapters that follow.

⁹⁹ On this occurrence, see Chapter 6 of this thesis, 'Epic Anxiety: Rewriting Homer in One's Own Image'.

¹⁰⁰ Jenkyns (2010), 266.

This unique American environment for the reception of epic in new versions will be treated in more detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

Theory and Implications

The thesis that follows has six chapters, each exploring a category of receptions that stood out to me as a distinct thread, against the mass of poems in my catalogue, and appeared to have been shaped by a certain cultural-historical trend in the United States in the twentieth century (in addition to being held within the wider contexts of Modernism, and the American epic tradition, as already described).

The first chapter, ‘Epic Insight: Classical Education and the Immanent Self’, focuses on modern approaches to Classics in the American undergraduate system. It argues that exposure to Homer and Virgil in translation, and in an explicitly humanist teaching context, prompted poets to engage with ancient epic as a source of personal insight. The historical discussion in this chapter continues the argument in the introduction, that features of education account for the widespread phenomenon of lyric receptions of epic in modern American poetry.

The second chapter, ‘Epic Communion: Recalling the Universal Self in Homeric Archetypes’, suggests that the rise of Freudian and related psychologies in the early twentieth-century U.S. created another strong mode of reception, that of searching for a communal consciousness in archetypes from myth. Again because of the undergraduate translation courses, figures from Homer and Virgil were a favourite point of entry for this practice among American poets.

My third chapter, ‘Epic Poetics: Digression, Simile and *Katabasis* in American War Poetry’, analyses new versions of epic written by American military veterans of the twentieth century, and proposes that veteran poets extracted short poetic devices from Homer and Virgil in an attempt to communicate the incommunicable. By invoking epic digression, simile and

the descent to the underworld, these poets recreated for non-veteran audiences the uncanny perceptual horrors of war, which non-poetic language falls short of expressing, in an attempt to bear adequate witness to their experiences, and avert future armed conflicts.

My fourth chapter is about national politics: ‘Epic Comparison: Defining America in Modern Political Poetry’. It argues that civic-minded poets of the past century used symbols from Homer and Virgil as points of comparison, in an effort to steer their country toward certain idealised identities, and away from perils and mistakes, by pushing off against the epic past into the American future.

The fifth chapter of the thesis deals with feminism (‘Epic Revision: Feminist Versions of the *Odyssey*’), and explores a mode of reception that was very prominent in the United States in the twentieth century: ‘revisionist mythmaking’, poets ‘liberating’ marginalised epic characters (especially women) by making space for them in new versions, in effect updating the canon for the modern era.

My sixth and final chapter, ‘Epic Anxiety: Rewriting Homer in One’s Own Image’, examines the role of Homer as a benchmark and rival for major poets Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, who strove to neutralise the threat and integrate it in their careers, by subsuming the *Odyssey* within the modes of their own characteristic poetic programmes.

Each chapter has two main parts: historical and theoretical context, and close readings. My main goal of methodology in this project is to strike a balance between historical interpretation, and a sense of the aesthetic moment of reception, new for each reader.¹⁰¹ In every chapter, I have sought to shed light on the period of production for that category of poems, while also capturing new readings of the examples chosen for close analysis (incorporating whatever historical embeddedness and unconscious bias I bring to my

¹⁰¹ Cf. Martindale (2006): ‘A poem is, from one point of view, a social event in history, as is any public response to it. But we also need to avoid privileging history over the other element in Jauss’s model, the present moment in which the text is experienced, received, partly aesthetically (though that moment too is always potentially subject to historicization). If we respect both elements, our interpretations can become “critical”, self-aware, recognizing our self-implication, but they will not thereby (necessarily) stand forever’ (5).

interpretations).¹⁰² I also found that it was sometimes helpful to consider the modern poet's moment of reception in reading Homer or Virgil, and how that experience might be encoded in the poem, or in primary sources specifying the poet's attitudes toward epic. However, I do agree with Stephen Harrison that 'it is an easier task to attempt the reconstruction of the cultural horizons of the collective model readership of a classical text than the mental processes of a single historical author';¹⁰³ so I have included details and remarks from the modern poets' publications and records also as a way of adding to the historical picture of their collective demographic in general, at that point in time.

The theoretical premise of the thesis is German and English reception theory (including the work of Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss and Charles Martindale),¹⁰⁴ and its points of overlap with historicism. I used the concept of a 'horizon of expectations' – the qualities that a reader of a certain period 'would even without thinking understand [or presume] about the work before they actually encountered it'¹⁰⁵ – to shape my historical research and arguments. In this introduction and the chapters to come, I am hopeful of having estimated, at least to some extent, what modern American poets brought with them from their environment to their readings of Homer and Virgil, which might have caused their receptions to take shape as they did.

Although I do agree in theory with the premise of new historicism, that texts arise inextricably within history,¹⁰⁶ and that history itself is 'textual', 'contingent' and relative,¹⁰⁷ in practice I admit that I subscribe more to this aim expressed by Ralph Hexter: 'Perhaps

¹⁰² As Martindale (1993) noted: 'A set of signs becomes a poem when it is realized by a reader, who thus acts as a "performer". She will have to decide innumerable details of phrasing, rhythm, sound, tone, syntax and so on, and in that sense we cannot draw a firm distinction between reading a poem and offering a (critical) reading of it' (17).

¹⁰³ Harrison (2007), 14.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Iser (1974), Iser (1980), Jauss (1982) and Martindale (1993).

¹⁰⁵ Hexter (2006), 26.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Batstone (2006), quoting S. Hahn (2002) *On Derrida*, 51: '“We can only speak and think through a particular language that we did not create, so that we are always thinking and speaking in a medium that is structured for us (historically) without its being mapped to the world in such a way that reveals the world without a point of view or with a *universal* point of view”' (15). Also, Martindale (1993), quoting 'Derrida's notorious phrase, "there is no outside text" ("il n'y a pas d'hors-texte")' (14).

¹⁰⁷ Eagleton (2008), 197. Cf. Eagleton (2008): 'There was no single determinable truth to any particular narrative or event, just a conflict of interpretations whose outcome was finally determined by power rather than truth' (197).

everything is connected, but some connections are more significant than others, and we look to historians to make exactly that claim'.¹⁰⁸ In this sense my work belongs to a more traditional, philological historicism. Of course the poems of my thesis occurred in particular historical contexts (and certainly not from an 'unmediated' encounter between poets and the original epics, no matter how little contextual material was included in the undergraduate translation courses); however, certain threads of influence do seem to me to stand out importantly against the full variety of modern history: translations (which were themselves shaped by cultural tides), the philosophy and practice of humanist teaching, contemporaneous receptions, Victorian lyric versions (as an outdated model to diverge from) and the other forces explored in the chapters that follow. In my close readings, I also utilise certain formalist methods, considering the internal qualities and dynamics of the poems at hand.

I follow Theodore Ziolkowski in employing a 'comparative perspective',¹⁰⁹ which prefers to attempt a broad view of the subject, rather than studying a single poet or decade to the exclusion of the whole arc of the phenomenon. That this admits major room for inadequacy of scholarship and mistakes of understanding, I have no doubt; but I believe that the advantages of this method, in terms of the contributions it can hope to make to the fields of classical reception studies and American literary history, outweigh its limitations. As Martindale indicated, all 'stable' interpretive stances are just convenient 'fictions' to aid and allow interpretation, and 'can only be sustained [...] by an "act of will"'.¹¹⁰ The shape of my thesis, with its big-picture viewpoint and subjective division of chapters, is one such productive 'fiction'. The topics and influences discussed in each part interpenetrate the others, and it is likely that I miss many of the trees in an attempt to describe the outline of the forest. However, I believe that these boundaries, rough, permeable and impermanent though they

¹⁰⁸ Hexter (2006), 28.

¹⁰⁹ See Ziolkowski (1993): 'Only a few scholars have tentatively investigated the impact of Virgil on groups of writers. Usually a single dominant figure has been considered largely in isolation from fellow writers in his own country as well as other countries. As a result [...] the students of Robert Frost [...] often remain unaware of the overarching generational factors motivating the specific figure with whom they are dealing. I hope to remedy that deficiency with an overview that approaches the question with a comparative perspective' (x).

¹¹⁰ Martindale (1993), 13-15, 29.

may be, do make it possible to coax apart and hold separate, at least for the duration of each chapter, the layered, simultaneous forces at work in shaping American receptions of Homer and Virgil in the past century.

The nineteen poems I chose for close reading are mainly short, and by design not the famous, lengthy versions that have already been extensively analysed in scholarship.¹¹¹ Most of the poems (and sometimes even poets) that I discuss in detail have not yet been explored for their intertextual potential, in published work. The poems are also, by coincidence, often written by poets who amassed a large number of epic receptions in their careers. I did not plan this, but rather noticed it after the fact. Perhaps consistent engagement caused a depth of relation to Homer or Virgil that resulted in particularly interesting new versions. Finally, ‘intertexts can sometimes be essential to a work’s meaning’,¹¹² and I chose receptions that formed a vital and vitalising link to the epic tradition.

There are two important metaphors from reception theory that inform the use I have made of texts in my close readings. The first is the image of reception as ‘an encounter’, two equal forces interacting to create textual meaning in the space between them¹¹³ – in this case, the ancient epic text, and the modern poet as reader (as well as another, triangular interaction between the epic text, the new poem of reception, and me as the reader and critic). The idea that textual meaning arises from a meeting between text and reader stems from the work of Jauss and Iser, and is summarised by Craig Kallendorf: ‘Reception “operates with a different temporality” from the passive handing down of classical material from the past to the present: it involves “the *active* participation of readers (including readers who are themselves creative artists) in a two-way process, backwards as well as forwards, in which the present and the past are in dialogue with each other”’.¹¹⁴ In this sense, reception is a dynamic process, a dialectic between ancient and modern, resulting in an ephemeral, vivid meaning that is

¹¹¹ E.g. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. For substantial bibliography on Eliot and the reception of Virgil, see Ziolkowski (1993), 119ff. and 255 (n. 44).

¹¹² Schmitz (2002), 80.

¹¹³ Martindale (1993), 32.

¹¹⁴ Kallendorf (2010), 2, quoting Martindale (2010).

untouchable, and always changing.¹¹⁵ Although it is impossible to pin it down, that is the apparition that my close readings attempt to show in glimpses.

The second image that affected my interpretations of poetry in this project is that of reception as reduction. As already mentioned in these pages, this model seems to me to encapsulate the whole spectrum of shortening mechanisms that American poets since 1914 have used on the epics of Homer and Virgil (including distilling, excluding, extracting, inserting, replacing, miniaturising and simplifying). I encountered this concept in an exemplary essay by Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia, arguing that a poem by Wallace Stevens ('The World as Meditation') is 'a radical reduction of *The Odyssey* to domestic anecdote'.¹¹⁶ In reference to the poems of my thesis, this metaphor of reception connotes engagement with a Modernist experiment, of testing the limits of 'essence': these poets were interested in whether it was possible to reduce the scale of traditional epic, without reducing its power; to take a part for the whole, but still find the whole contained in the part; and to build renewed, undivided meaning from fragments. I have previously cited the example of a mirror, any one piece of which, if shattered, is still perfectly reflective of whatever passes in front of it. Another analogy is a clear spring of water: whether a huge jug, or a single drop, is taken, the properties are the same.¹¹⁷ In the end, many of the reduced receptions in my close readings do succeed, as fragments without loss, reduced but not diminished. They answer a fundamental doubt of the twentieth century, whether language and art are sufficient in the face of the discovered chaos of the universe and human history.¹¹⁸ The reduction of epic

¹¹⁵ Cf. Iser (1974): 'The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader' (274-5).

¹¹⁶ Dubois & Lentricchia (2003b), 92.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Taplin (2002), on 'how the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome have continued in ever-shifting ways to filter up through the strata of dead generations, and to flow as fresh wellsprings for poets' (19).

¹¹⁸ Ziokowski (1993) wrote of the modern shattering of epic, as if it were plainly a decline: 'Yet despite these examples, the decades since World War II provide nothing to match either the great number of Virgilian works in Europe and America in the years surrounding the bimillennial celebrations or the evidence for Virgil's influence on many of the finest and most representative writers of the period. Recent works are too discrete to constitute any groups or to display patterns other than the negative pattern of fragmentation. We do not live in Virgilian times' (235); but I have observed that the

seems to indicate (or grasp toward the hope) that the recourses of literature are indeed sufficient, that even violent splintering cannot touch or reduce the essential clarity contained in any one piece of poetic expression.

These questions about the twentieth-century shape of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, and their possible answers, are important because epic is important. The genre, founded in the works of Homer, has been of consequence in Western civilization for over twenty-five centuries. At the risk of proposing a circular (or humanist) argument, I consider that charting its course across the sky of civilisation is a valid task, clarifying aspects of human nature and accomplishment (which is, to my mind, the goal of all knowledge-building pursuits, at root). By exploring a recent chapter in the evolution and effects of epic, my thesis contributes, in a real sense, to the history of the core of Western literature. Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold write about the mystery of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:

It is not clear for what kind of context or for what purposes the Homeric poems were composed. Nor do we know how they were performed, or when they reached a state of textual fixation: in some ways, they seem more surprising and inexplicable than lyric. Although the composition, function and performance of epic are much debated, one thing is clear: the Homeric poems enjoyed lasting authority and success in the ancient Greek world. Already in the sixth century, Xenophanes could state: ‘Since the beginning everyone learned from Homer...’¹¹⁹

That this particular step in the long lifetime of epic has links to Modernism, means that it contributes also to an understanding of that cultural movement, and its ripples and after-effects in literary history. Perhaps my argument about the undergraduate translation courses serves, furthermore, to suggest a positive result of studying ancient literature in translation – not a superior result, maybe, but a constructive side effect.

It was beyond the scope of this project to consider the future of epic, whatever the next step in its evolution will be discovered to be. I have been gathering examples of epic reception in this Modernist style well into 2014 (I found a new poem in *The New Yorker* just one week before I submitted my final draft); but these are just lingering aftershocks of the phenomenon observed in this thesis. It seems to be agreed that Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*

‘fragmentation’ of modern epic reduction is not simply a ‘negative pattern’, but contains growth and possibility as well.

¹¹⁹ Graziosi & Haubold (2009), 97, quoting Xenophanes, fr. 10 D-K.

(1990) represents the postmodern form of epic.¹²⁰ Whether the millennial version will be shown to be prose (for instance, as studied in the work of Fiona Cox),¹²¹ film, television or some online mode of articulation, it is doubtless already happening around us, and waiting for future research to determine its shape and causes and limits.

Charles Martindale notably observed: ‘Our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected. As a result we cannot get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions’.¹²² Further to this, Craig Kallendorf explains: ‘If the reader is an active participant in the making of meaning, [...] the different readings of a classical text over time become not misreadings, but the only readings we have, ours being simply the last in the chain of receptions. From this perspective, the chain of receptions moves from the margins to the center’,¹²³ such that, in James I. Porter’s words, ‘reception is in a strong sense all there is’.¹²⁴ In the light of this theory, what happens next in the evolution of epic will be shaped in some part by what happened in the United States in the twentieth century. Thus, this project sets up the field for the next chapter. For now, it hopes to have made a contribution to locating the modern form of epic. George Steiner reflects: ‘Epic is still, in its scale and particularity, an excellent medium for analysis of our times, but it may now be a pattern of minutiae rather than a single heroic vision’.¹²⁵ Indeed, that is what the chapters of this thesis combine to suggest. Far from being ‘dead’, the epic genre has rather been refracted into its composite parts, its scope reduced to the ‘essential’, and its lyric insights expanded and opened outward, for the Modernist century.

¹²⁰ E.g. Steiner (2010) relates ‘the great circular journey taken by [Walcott’s] narrator, starting and ending in the Caribbean and moving through Holland, Africa, New England, Lisbon, London, Dublin, the Aegean, and Istanbul. The effect is simultaneously of a multinational inclusiveness and a postmodern rootlessness’ (262).

¹²¹ Cox (2011) *Sibylline Sisters: Virgil’s presence in contemporary women’s writing*.

¹²² Martindale (1993), 7.

¹²³ Kallendorf (2010), 2.

¹²⁴ Porter (2008), 469.

¹²⁵ Steiner (2010), 262.

1. Epic Insight: Classical Education and the Immanent Self

Teaching Classical Literature in Twentieth-Century America

In his essay on the history of classical education, Seth Schein advises: ‘The importance of the school as the site of transmission of the classical languages and cultures cannot be overestimated’.¹ Indeed, topics in Latin and Greek comprised the core of formal education in the West, especially since the Renaissance,² and, as I will argue in this chapter, the specific approach underpinning this focus on antiquity in the American liberal arts classroom after World War I crucially shaped the position of Homer and Virgil in the minds of a generation of modern American poets. Because students of the past century were taught explicitly in school, and particularly in undergraduate-level translation courses, to view the epics as timeless *exempla* of human nature and universal wisdom (a view that originated in ancient conceptions of the educational value of epic poetry,³ but was importantly restored and expanded in the United States in the twentieth century), poets educated in this system appear to have measured their personal identities, and relationships with the surrounding, immanent world, against the iconic experiences presented in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. This connective inclination, which was arguably sparked by humanist remarks in the classroom and often extended into a lifetime of poetic practice, produced a body of epic receptions in which American poets interweave references to the ancient stories with explorations of

¹ Schein (2008), 80.

² On the classical foundations of Western education, and American education in particular, see e.g. Rudolph (1962), Rudolph (1977), Kernan (1997), Percy (2005) and Cohen & Kisker (2010).

³ On the use of epic in the classroom ‘from the archaic period until well into the Byzantine era’, as an example of the perfect virtue of the past, to guide behaviour in the present, see Keith (2000), 2 and 3. She writes, for instance: ‘The actions of the epic hero are interpreted [...] as models of good (or bad) behavior, for imitation (or avoidance) by the student, who is invited by poet and teacher alike to identify himself as a latter-day Achilles or Odysseus’ (3). This universalising impulse, to connect the epic scenarios with personal life, was already present in early America, as well. For instance, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson: ‘When I read [the ancient authors] I seem to be only reading the History of my own Times and my own Life’ (quoted in Briggs (2010), 283, originally from L.J. Cappon (ed.) (1959) *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 295).

modern (and especially personal) life, from an apparent sense that classical epic can offer vital insight into present experience, with the historical differences collapsed and overcome.

Although the study of Classics was once the compelling heart of traditional schooling, serving both humanistic and vocational functions,⁴ its vitality had declined substantially in the United States by the end of the nineteenth century. Edward Everett Hale is recorded as declaring: ‘The classical men made us hate Latin and Greek’,⁵ a common grievance among students of the period. The classical curriculum and teaching practices in the U.S. were initially derived closely from the British model,⁶ and focused on providing an ‘unmediated’ encounter with the original text, during which pupils were drilled on grammatical forms, syntax and style as if in a vacuum, with a near-complete absence of historical contextualisation. Gerald Graff quotes an amusing account of classical pedantry in the last decades of the nineteenth century:

William Lyon Phelps, an undergraduate at Yale in the [early 1880s], recalled a course in Homer in which the instructor ‘never changed the monotonous routine, never made a remark, but simply called on individuals to recite or to scan, said “That will do,” [and] put down a mark; so that in the last recitation in June, after a whole college year of this intolerable classroom drudgery, I was surprised to hear him say, and again without any emphasis, “The poems of Homer are the greatest that have ever proceeded from the mind of man, class is dismissed,” and we went out into the sunshine’.⁷

Such methods were supported by the belief that, from exposure to the surface level of ancient texts, students would ‘imbibe’ also the deep meaning and ‘spirit’ of the classical canon.⁸ This

⁴ Although the humanistic justifications for studying Classics are well-known and were discussed in the introduction to my thesis (self-knowledge, aesthetic beauty, mental rigour and a grasp of the continuity of human history), Else (1956) reminded his readers that it was the professional value that first assured Latin its prominence in educational contexts: ‘We forget too easily that throughout most of its history as an education subject Latin was preeminently vocational. Down to the seventeenth century, if not beyond, most people learned Latin not primarily because of the beauties of Latin literature but because they had to learn the language if they wanted to pursue any calling higher than that of ditch-digger or tavern-keeper. Church, law, medicine, science, scholarship, philosophy, instruction, diplomacy, even international business and banking: the passport to them all was Latin. Thus it was that Lord Chesterfield could write to his son: “There is no great credit in knowing Latin, for everybody knows it; and it is only a shame not to know it” (1-2). Else pointed out, furthermore, that ‘the twentieth century is the first century in Western history in which the Classics are simply one field among many’ (2), and also that Greek has been in decline on and off since the second century A.D., and that it is the decline of Latin that is unique to the twentieth century.

⁵ Quoted in Graff (1987), 30.

⁶ See Percy (2005).

⁷ Graff (1987), 29, quoting William Lyon Phelps (1939) *Autobiography with Letters*, Oxford University Press, 136-7.

⁸ Charles Francis Adams, Jr. parodied this teaching assumption as ‘the great-impalpable-essence-and-precious-residuum theory’, that ‘a knowledge of Greek grammar, and the having puzzled through the

theory, however well-intentioned, was soon lost in practice, since the link between the dry, repetitive drills and the implied deeper, human value was never made explicit in the classroom; and classical study thus deteriorated into a dull and plodding exercise, despised by students as mind-numbing and useless, and eventually condemned by administrators and academic theorists, as well. A famous and powerful critic of the waning system was the prominent Harvard graduate Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who delivered a Phi Beta Kappa speech in 1883, publicly reviling the outdated training provided by the classical program of his time: ‘In these days of repeating-rifles [... Harvard] sent me and my classmates out into the strife equipped with shields and swords and javelins’.⁹

Complaints such as this prompted a call for reform, for a more vital, vibrant version of classical pedagogy in the United States. In 1917, Andrew Fleming West, an eminent professor of Latin and dean of the graduate school at Princeton University, hosted a conference and edited a collection of remarks (by ‘ex-presidents, industry titans, and intellectual heavy weights’)¹⁰ in support of a reinvigorated classical curriculum. In his introduction to the volume, West exhorted:

Latin and Greek must be made natural to the American boy, as they were native to the boys of Rome and Athens. [...] It is often said that enthusiasm without precision was a mark of the Renaissance. Precision without enthusiasm is our danger now – or else silly superficiality and dilution in order to make the classics ‘interesting’. It is hard to say it – but even this is better than dull pedantry.¹¹

In the same context, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard, advised a similar direction for American classics programs:

The problems, social, political and international, that forced themselves upon antiquity are on the whole nearer to the ones that we face, and still more shall face, than are those of any intervening period. The classics in the colleges and universities ought, I believe, to be taught far less as they have been in past years from the point of view of philology, and more from the point of view of humanity, that is, of the thoughts of men as individuals and as communities, especially in their bearing upon present day civilization. Such a change is taking place, but it ought to be pushed much farther. If this were done, we might witness a revival of the classics as a living force in education, and in the life of educated men.¹²

Anabasis and three books of the Iliad, infuses into the boy’s nature the imperceptible spirit of Greek literature, which will appear in the results of his subsequent work, just as manure, spread upon a field, appears in the crop which that field bears’ (quoted in Graff (1987), 30, originally from Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (1884) *A College Fetich*, Boston: Lea and Shepherd, 20-1).

⁹ Quoted in Rudolph (1977), 183, originally from *A College Fetich*, 14 (as in note 8).

¹⁰ Briggs (2010), 291.

¹¹ West (1917), 3.

¹² Lowell in West (1917), 167.

In a later, and even more vehement, outline for renewal, Gerald F. Else explained the difficulty of animating ancient material for modern students:

[The contemporary man] sees the Greeks and Romans as people a long way off, irremediably different from himself. Consider this remark by the poet Auden (who was well trained in the Classics): 'If there is any reaction to the Greeks which may be called typical of our age as compared with preceding times, it is, I think, a feeling that they were a very odd people indeed; so much so that when we come across something they wrote which seems similar to our own way of thinking, we immediately suspect that we have misunderstood the passage. It is the unlikeness of the Greeks to ourselves, the gulf between the kind of assumptions they made, the kind of questions they asked and our own, that strikes us more than anything else'.¹³

In light of this alienation between ancient and modern concerns, Else called for a vigorously, explicitly humanistic bent in teaching:

It is more difficult to teach the Classics today than it has ever been. We cannot expect our students to genuflect when they hear the names of Sophocles or Plato or Vergil. Cicero, in full toga, thundering at Catiline or pleading for the imperium of Cn. Pompey seems to them dreadfully remote, unreal, stuffy – until they somehow catch the idea that, in spite of the difference in scenery, the death-throes of the Roman Republic are full of meanings for us today – or until someone lifts the toga, so to speak, and lets them in on the fact that this solemn orator was also an irresponsible wag, who dearly loved a good joke or a vivid story, and would risk his career for a bon mot: in short, until they are made to realize that Cicero was human.¹⁴

He continued, vividly:

This is the new way of receiving the message of the past, not as a practical skill or a doorway to positions of 'dignity and emolument', but as a part of the life of the spirit. [...] This, it seems to me, is the kind of thing Ortega [y Gasset] means when he says: 'There is but one way to save a classic: to give up revering him and use him for our own salvation – that is, to lay aside his classicism, to bring him close to us, to make him contemporary, to set his pulse going again with an injection of blood from our own veins, whose ingredients are our passions – and our problems... Let us try to resurrect our classic by immersing him in life once more'.¹⁵

It was in answering this call for vivifying teaching that American Classics began to differentiate itself from its European predecessors. Lee T. Percy strongly criticises the imitative nature of the American Classics program, which he perceives as having failed to adapt its models to meet the cultural demands of a new setting, and thus as accounting in part

¹³ Else (1956), 3, quoting W.H. Auden (1948) 'Introduction', in *The Portable Greek Reader*, 16.

¹⁴ Else (1956), 6.

¹⁵ Else (1956), 7-8, quoting Ortega y Gasset (1949) 'In Search of Goethe from Within' *Partisan Review* 16, 1186. In contrast to this dictum appears to stand a British view from the same period. C.M. Bowra, in his lecture *A Classical Education* (1945), emphasised the dissimilarity between present and classical periods as critical to the edifying effect of the study of the classics: 'The distance and the difference of the classics from ourselves is a matter of fundamental importance. In reading them we do not find our own habits of thought or our own way of looking at things. We are indeed liable to misinterpret them because they are so different. The long history of the Homeric question is an important lesson on how wrong honest and intelligent men can be when they examine a kind of art which lies outside their own experience' (Bowra (1945), 18-19).

for the stark decline and imminent demise of the academic subject.¹⁶ However, I propose that Classics in the United States did, in fact, evolve away from its inspirations in England and Germany in one notable way in the early twentieth century: by developing and widely disseminating a new utility value for the subject, as a living source of timeless human perspectives and enduring wisdom. The idea that man's unchanging virtues are contained in classical literature was a commonplace of the humanist philosophy,¹⁷ and it gained prominence at the turn of the century, 'in a reaction against the growing emphasis upon science, industrialism, and naturalistic philosophies' within the academy.¹⁸ Its supporters included the presidents and leading academics of liberal arts institutions like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and the University of Chicago. The twentieth-century humanist view that the essential, virtuous nature of human beings is eternal, and that its cultivation is the aim of liberal education, is represented in this declaration of Irwin Edman, professor at Columbia in the mid-twentieth century:

Columbia College may be in the city of New York, but we need neither ancient poets nor modern psychologists to remind us that human nature remains essentially the same in city or country. [...] The threat of universal war, the menace of the extinction of civilization itself, these are new, though perhaps not altogether new. But the meanings of life, which from the beginning were shadowed by death, these themes are perennial. [...] It is still the function of a liberal education, insofar as that is achievable during college years, to initiate the young into the scope, the intensities, the order possible in art and sometimes in life. [...] The world is radically changed, doubtless; but certain themes, ideas, feelings remain, and the paramount expression of these are in the classics of the Western World.¹⁹

The drive to develop humanist undergraduate courses springing from these beliefs became even more urgent and established, following the perceived threat to civilised ideals posed by the devastation of the world wars. George Steiner writes of modern war trauma determining the tendency to find commonalities between ancient literature and contemporary experience:

It is no accident that twentieth-century poetry, drama and fiction should revert, with almost

¹⁶ Percy (2005), x. That formal instruction in Latin and Greek declined precipitously in the States in the past century is clear, e.g. Cohen & Kisker (2010): 'Just under half of the public high school students took Latin in 1910, and fewer than 10 percent did so by the end of World War II' (151). For further statistics, see Rudolph (1977), 182, 214, and Winterer (2002), 180-1.

¹⁷ Butts & Cremin (1953) summarised this view of modern humanism: 'Values, knowledge, and truth are unchangeable and absolute and exist in a realm that is above and beyond nature' (331), and 'the principal repository of these values is the great tradition of Western civilization, especially the classics of Greece and Rome' (495), hence the perceived importance of maintaining these studies in the universities.

¹⁸ Butts & Cremin (1953), 331.

¹⁹ Edman (1954), 269-70.

obsessive frequency, to the world of Oedipus and Agamemnon, of Odysseus and Alcestis. [...] We are closer to the reality of Aeschylus than were Matthew Arnold or Jowett, closer to the sensibility of Marcus Aurelius than was Pater. [...] We know, as many had forgotten before Auschwitz, that man is an uncertain guest in the world, that [...] the gods – as Artemis reminds Hippolytus – do not care to look upon human torture, that cities are made ash and men and women set to wander the earth like masterless dogs. We know now, as the classical humanists of the nineteenth century did not, that the black spurt of unreason in Ajax, in Herakles, in Pentheus, lurks in the fabric of every mind. Did Wilamowitz, when considering the language or syntax of *The Trojan Women*, suppose that in the heart of Europe children would soon have their brains dashed out before their mother's eyes [...]? If anything, the knife cuts too close.²⁰

Elizabeth Dodd suggested that the corrosion of stability in general in the past century may have amplified the urge among artists and readers, to connect with and assimilate ancient tales:

‘Perhaps in the twentieth century, as we have marched steadily toward the brink of self-destruction through two world wars, nuclear bombs and accidents at power plants, and a growing ecological disaster that has, in Bill McKibbin’s phrase, put us at the “end of nature”, the need for continuity has taken on a desperate, poignant difference from our similar needs in earlier centuries’.²¹

The humanist idea of revitalised literary education, to meet these many challenges of the new century, spread swiftly, and in very similar language, to practical application in the classroom. In academic settings, far from being implicit or theoretical, the use of ancient texts to inform modern understanding of human nature, and to guide the experience of the self, was stated as an explicit procedure, a goal to be attained by conscious effort. The modern poet Dana Gioia recalls the teaching approach of Robert Fitzgerald, in a masters-level literature course at Harvard in the mid-1970s:

To understand these poems, Fitzgerald insisted, one not only needed to study the cultures and literary traditions which created them. One also needed to measure them against life. The ultimate measure of Homer’s, Virgil’s, and Dante’s greatness was that their poems taught one a great deal about life, and that life, in turn, illuminated them. It is embarrassing to admit now that Fitzgerald’s position disturbed us. In Harvard seminars one took care to avoid that four letter word, life. [...] Years later I heard an astronomer explain that the ‘simplicity and elegance’ of a scientific solution represented the best criteria for its adoption. Gradually the simplicity and elegance of Fitzgerald’s approach to poetry led me to question my own needlessly complicated methods. I realized how much my critical education had alienated me from my own experience of literature. Fitzgerald’s unorthodox and often subjective remarks on poems almost always focused on features I found most moving and memorable. There had to be some way of reconciling one’s intellectual, emotional, and moral responses to literature. [...] Achieving that reconciliation would become my challenge.²²

²⁰ Steiner in Auden et al. (1964), 83-4.

²¹ Dodd (1992), 22.

²² Gioia (2011), 269-70.

In other words, not only was this connective method taught openly by twentieth-century American professors of literature; but it also took hold in the minds of creative students. Allan Bloom summarised the central tenet of humanist teaching, in his bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*:

[Teaching] is a condition of investigating *the* question, ‘What is man?’, in relation to his highest aspirations as opposed to his low and common needs. A liberal education means precisely helping students to pose this question to themselves, to become aware that the answer is neither obvious nor simply unavailable, and that there is no serious life in which this question is not a continuous concern. [...] Book learning is most of what a teacher can give – properly administered in an atmosphere in which its relation to life is plausible. Life will happen to his students. The most he can hope is that what he might give will inform life.²³

That this principle, of insight through literary investigation, lasted to the end of the twentieth century essentially intact, is attested by film critic David Denby, who returned to Columbia University in 1991 to take the famous literature survey course (‘Literature Humanities’, or ‘Lit Hum’), which he found more or less unchanged from his first encounter with it, as a Columbia undergraduate in 1961.²⁴ He quoted the advice of his English literature professor, in introducing the study of Homer:

‘Don’t get sucked in by false ideas’, [Professor Edward Taylor] said. ‘You’re not here for political reasons. You’re here for very selfish reasons. You’re here to build a self. You create a self, you don’t inherit it. One way you create it is out of the past. Look, if you find the *Iliad* dull or invidious or a glorification of war, you’re right. It’s a poem in your mind; let it take shape in your mind’.²⁵

This early twentieth-century shift in emphasis in literary and classical education, from grammatical drills and rote memorisation, to active encouragement that students connect with the abiding vitality of literature from the past, encouraged the rise of a new channel for exposure to Classics, which arguably counterbalanced the decline of formal Latin and Greek curricula: the undergraduate translation course.²⁶ Taught in excerpts and in translation, in a survey style, to college undergraduates in the first or second year of study, and largely free

²³ Bloom (1987), 21.

²⁴ Denby (1996): ‘The courses, though somewhat different in their selection of texts [...], had not changed much in conception’ (13). On the 1991 reading list were the Lattimore translations of the *Iliad* (1951) and *Odyssey* (1967), and the Fitzgerald translation of the *Aeneid* (1981).

²⁵ Denby (1996), 31-2. In introducing the *Odyssey*, this same professor declared: ‘“You are all Telemachus, aren’t you[?]”’ (76).

²⁶ Winterer (2002) writes of this development: ‘It would be a mistake to assume that classical antiquity vanished from the colleges and universities in the twentieth century. It thrived, in fact, in the compulsory Western civilization courses that flourished at many colleges and universities between World War I and the 1960s’ (181).

from historical or scholarly background information, ancient literature (and the epics of Homer and Virgil, in particular) took on new life on a broad scale.²⁷ Initially an inspiration of the general education movement, to provide a stable curricular core in the face of ‘the perceived chaos of the new elective system’,²⁸ these ‘great books’ humanities courses soon spread from Columbia (where they began, as the general honors course introduced by literature professor John Erskine in 1920)²⁹ to elite colleges throughout the United States.³⁰

Graff described the founding concept behind the literary survey course:

Erskine’s idea was to treat the classics as if they were contemporary documents. He devoted one long evening per week to each work (philosophical and theological treatises as well as imaginative literature were included) and encouraged the fifteen or so students in each class to read the books as ‘the best sellers of ancient times’, experiencing them ‘as spontaneously and humanly as they would read current best sellers’ and forming ‘their opinions at once in a free-for-all discussion’. Erskine said that when he was ‘told by angry colleagues that a great book couldn’t be read in a week, not intelligently!’ he replied that ‘when the great books were first published, they were popular’, and the public who first liked them read them quickly, perhaps overnight, without waiting to hear scholarly lectures about them. [...] ‘In answer to the assertion that to read a great work in translation was not to read it at all, he remarked that if this were so, very few of his colleagues had read the Bible’.³¹

David Denby confirmed that a similar, unmediated approach was still in place at Columbia in the 1990s:

[‘Lit Hum’ and ‘C.C.’ were] taught not by authorities or specialists holding forth in a lecture hall, but by a wide variety of faculty working entirely in small sections. [...] The charm, and

²⁷ See, again, the statistics cited by S. Schein (2007), in my introduction, note 15. D. Gioia (in the original version of his essay) noted that ‘[Fitzgerald’s] *Odyssey*, for example, has sold nearly two million copies, making it one of the century’s best-selling books of verse’ (97). The great majority of these sales are accounted for by the proliferation of undergraduate survey courses. Allardyce (1982) suggested that ‘the number of these early strivings in general education increased from two courses in 1911 to eighty-two by 1925’ (709), and Schein (2007) states that ‘100,000 students [still] take such courses annually’ in the U.S. (268).

²⁸ Allardyce (1982), 697.

²⁹ Reuben (1996), 228.

³⁰ It is useful to distinguish between literary survey courses, and those in civics and the social sciences. Denby (1996) concisely delineated the two complementary programs: ‘Literature Humanities [...] is (and was) devoted to a standard selection of European literary masterpieces; the other, Contemporary Civilization, [...] offers a selection of philosophical and social-theory masterpieces. They are both “great books” courses, or, if you like, “Western civ” surveys, a list of heavyweight names assembled in chronological order like the marble busts in some imaginary pantheon of glory’ (11). The belief in the timelessness and insight of ancient literature was espoused in the former. The approach in the latter likely emerged from the government-sponsored ‘War Aims’ courses rousing Americans for combat in World War I (cf. Allardyce (1982) and Schein (2007)), and focused more on teleology and progress, with the history of the Western world viewed as culminating in the excellence and virtue of twentieth-century Anglo-America. Both courses reiterated the humanist philosophy that past texts discuss people identical in nature to the modern students. Cf. a prominent civilisation textbook, Wallbank & Taylor (1942), 3.

³¹ Graff (1987), 134, quoting first John Erskine (1947) *Memory of Certain Persons*, 342-3; and then Lionel Trilling (1954) ‘Van Amringe and Keppel Eras’ *A History of Columbia College on Morningside*, 44.

some would say the strength, of the courses lay in their proud nonspecialization, their appeal to the old ideal of a student armed for selfhood and citizenship. The courses were situated as far as possible from the current vogues of ‘theory’ and ‘contextualization’ and such cutting-edge scholarly concerns as race, gender, and class. The student just jumped in; he read a series of great works. In contemporary academic terms, the courses were a scandal.³²

Because the classes covered an enormous amount of material in a short span, the texts were read swiftly; and because the texts were read in English, the students could consume them fluidly and interpret them confidently, without guidance or interference, based on personal instincts. The effect was to invite and allow decontextualised, universalising readings – or naïve misreadings, as scholars point out.³³ Although the prevalence of ‘great books’ programs has declined since the 1960s,³⁴ the translation course remains in place at many American colleges. For instance, after enumerating the contextualising exercises that she employs, in the introductory session of her undergraduate Classics survey course at the University of Maryland (including an account of Parry’s theory of oral composition, a metrical analysis of the first ten lines of the *Odyssey* and a comparison of translations), Classics professor Lillian Doherty admitted, ‘I don’t test the students on this material, so I’m not sure how much of it they grasp; but they do seem to get the point that Homer was not an American, or even an Englishman’.³⁵

The possible objections to this approach have been widely broadcasted and investigated. In 1964 D.S. Carne-Ross mocked the modern American translators, and the courses that ensured their popularity: ‘The academic translators are so well entrenched that they can afford to laugh at criticism. [...] Thanks to Classical Civilization courses in colleges all over the country, the demand for their work is steady. (And growing, as the population bulge submits more and more unqualified young men and women to the parody of a humane

³² Denby (1996), 14-15.

³³ E.g. Schein (2007) suggests that this treatment of the texts as ‘transparently familiar and recognizably contemporary’ grossly oversimplifies the study of ancient literature (281).

³⁴ See G. Allardyce (1982) on the causes of this decline after the Cold War: ‘Europe was no longer the world. Emerging were other peoples, other histories, a globe of historic diversity beyond the imagination of earlier Westerners, a cosmos where pluralism replaced the “oneness” of history and where human experience could not be ordered into a unilineal pattern of development. As educators came to recognize the world in this way, they recognized, at the same time, the poverty of the Western Civ course’ (717-18).

³⁵ Doherty (1985), 165-6.

education)'.³⁶ In the same questionnaire about the value of the classics, Steiner called the 'survey-course' a 'hurdle-race over scattered masterpieces'.³⁷ Allan Bloom condemned, in particular, the erasure of differences between literary-historical periods, and the spineless relativism that results:

Vague insistence that without the humanities we will no longer be civilized rings very hollow when no one can say what 'civilized' means, when there are said to be many civilizations that are all equal. The claim of 'the classic' loses all legitimacy when the classic cannot be believed to tell the truth. The truth question is most pressing and acutely embarrassing for those who deal with the philosophic texts, but also creates problems for those treating purely literary works. There is an enormous difference between saying, as teachers once did, 'You must learn to see the world as Homer or Shakespeare did', and saying, as teachers now do, 'Homer and Shakespeare had some of the same concerns you do and can enrich your vision of the world'. In the former approach students are challenged to discover new experiences and reassess old; in the latter, they are free to use the books in any way they please.³⁸

In his excellent essay on the treatment of Homer in modern American translation courses,

Schein protests:

It is often said that canonical great books are 'timeless' (or 'timeless classics'), but in fact each work was written in particular historical circumstances, and the varying institutional versions of the canonical list are themselves historical constructions. In its own time, virtually every work now read in a great books course called into question specific institutions and values of the culture in which it was created, whether to challenge and change them or, in the end, to reinforce and reaffirm them. If, as often happens in these courses, such works are read mainly in relation to one another, with insufficient attention to their original historical, social, and institutional contexts, they are mystified as timeless classics, lose their critical edge, and become mere affirmations of a supposed cultural heritage. This in turn masks their ideological power and allows them to be manipulated by opportunistic teachers and political leaders to promote themselves and their political purposes in the name of the 'eternal-classical'. At best, this has resulted in students misreading the canonical works or reading them one-dimensionally; at worst it led to the perversion of classical studies in German universities between 1933 and 1945 [when the ancient texts were warped to reflect and promote Nazi ideals].³⁹

In fact, I propose, 'at best' the teaching of timelessness and personal relevance in the interpretation of ancient epic, although inaccurate in many ways, has resulted in a creative movement, of effective and memorable poetic receptions written by mid- to late-twentieth century American poets. These versions are seemingly impelled by a search for insight in the classical texts, a process that poets potentially learned from the undergraduate translation courses. D.S. Carne-Ross, supporting the use of translations in theory, if not in the insipid practice to which they are sometimes put in modern universities, proposed:

³⁶ Carne-Ross in Auden et al. (1964), 31-2.

³⁷ Steiner in Auden et al. (1964), 86.

³⁸ Bloom (1987), 374.

³⁹ Schein (2007), 83.

Translation can serve to keep the classics on the cultural map. An Anglo-American comparison may make the point. More people, relatively, may know Greek and Latin in England than in America, but I wonder if the classics aren't more present to the literary mind here. In England you are either a classicist and read the ancient authors in the original or you leave them alone and stick to your last. [...] The American literary man who has developed the interests first awakened by a good Humanities or Classical Civilization course knows that without the languages he can't do justice to the ancient authors, but he knows too that he can't ignore them. They are on his map.⁴⁰

Endicott Peabody, the head master of the Groton School, supported the preservation of classics in American education explicitly as a catalyst, to develop 'in a select number of pupils a real love of Greek and Latin literature, which will be a lifelong source of pleasure and an inspiration to creative work'.⁴¹ Recent scholars of classical reception agree that a scrupulous understanding of Latin and Greek literature is not necessary for producing perceptive, artistic interpretations.⁴² Kenneth Haynes observes that, in the Modernist period, 'the lack of direct access to classics [...] sometimes – as with the exemplary instances of Broch, Joyce, and Mandelstam – seems to have acted as a positive incitement to engage classical texts in new ways';⁴³ and Felix Budelmann and Johannes Haubold affirm that 'the important thing to understand here is that one of the most interesting questions about traditions is what they allow people to do. Traditions are enabling. They enable people – scholars as much as poets, politicians and whole societies – to make certain connections. Traditions derive their power from people believing in them and using them in the way they choose'.⁴⁴

The chosen way to use the classics in the twentieth-century U.S. was to make them live, to connect with ancient texts in an 'unmediated' way, for vital artistic and personal goals and projects. One of these projects, which I believe stems directly from the interpretive methods encountered in the undergraduate translation courses, is the attempt to understand

⁴⁰ Carne-Ross in Auden et al. (1964), 29.

⁴¹ Peabody in West (1917), 200.

⁴² In fact, British poet Christopher Logue has asserted that, in creating his reception of the *Iliad*, 'he started out by consulting five reputable versions, from Chapman to Rieu; and [...] formed the opinion that the more Greek the translator knew, the worse the result' (Taplin (2002), 6, citing Logue 'Introduction' *War Music*).

⁴³ Haynes (2010), 113.

⁴⁴ Budelmann & Haubold (2008), 25.

the self in relation to the immanent world, by returning to the texts of Homer and Virgil. Joel Dinerstein explains the new importance of self-discovery through living in the modern period:

To be modern was to reject the wisdom of the ancients for self-authorization through experience. For such mid-nineteenth-century figures as Whitman, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Dostoevski, an objective, transcendent ideal of beauty gave way to a relativist notion of the sublime. Exposing one's self to the world – unaccompanied, unprotected – became the objective of the artistic (or intellectual life); experience became the equivalent of deeds.⁴⁵

Comprising my first category of modern lyric receptions of epic, a great number of recent American poets wrote expansive and sensitive short poems interweaving reflections on their engaged, modern experiences, with passages from the epic stories.⁴⁶ These poems take the classroom exercise of discovering the self through contact with the living epic, a step further, still 'min[ing] [the text] for what it still contains of truth-to-life',⁴⁷ but now elevating the inquiry to the level of art. This poetic programme addresses an important, modern poverty, defined by M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, as

a serious need for an encompassing poetry, one completely involved with what our lives really mean subjectively. That need reflects the ultimate pressure on modern sensibility to understand itself and to regain what [poet Charles] Olson called the 'human universe'. The pressure, right or wrong, is to reconceive reality in humanly reassuring ways rather than in chillingly impersonal ones. It is felt inescapably by poets, even when they hardly realize why they write as they do, as a pressure to remember and deepen their sense of our human reality while rejecting any hubristic, anthropomorphic self-deception.⁴⁸

That recent poets, exposed to ancient literature in the classroom, and invited to enliven it with their imaginations and use it to reflect and answer doubts about their own place in the world, should turn to Homer and Virgil in conceiving an artistic antidote to modern disconnection and impersonalism is not altogether surprising. As Steiner remarked, of the profound insightfulness of the *Iliad*:

[One] cannot do without Homer, not as a reader, not as someone who tries to write. As John Cowper Powys said, more than that of any other poet, Homer's account of man 'is like what

⁴⁵ Dinerstein (2008), 199.

⁴⁶ Examples of 'interweaving' poems include Eve Merriam 'Speaking of Marriage or Hers and His' (1958); Horace Gregory 'Elegy and Flame' (1973); Linda Pastan 'You Are Odysseus' (1975) and 'We Get What We Wish For at Our Peril' (2002); Rachel Hadas 'The Fall of Troy' (1975), and 'Teaching the Iliad' and 'The Blind Gates' (1989); Charles Simic 'My Weariness of Epic Proportions' (1982); Amy Clampitt 'Homer, A.D. 1982' (1985); Jorie Graham 'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay [Penelope at her Loom]' and 'Ravel and Unravel' (1987); Charles Dennis 'Hector's Return' and 'On the Way to School' (1988), and 'School Days' and 'In the Short Term' (2001); Anthony Hecht 'See Naples and Die' (1990); Rosanna Warren 'The Twelfth Day' (1993) and 'Arrival' (2003); and Alan Shapiro 'Lethe' (1996).

⁴⁷ Doherty (2009), 204.

⁴⁸ Rosenthal & Gall (1983), 10.

has happened, is happening, and will happen to us all, from the very beginning, in our history in this world until the end of human life upon this earth'. The night encounter seems to me to come as near as perception can to the harvesting of complete truth. Looking on each other, the bereft king and the slayer of men, shadowed by his own near doom, give voice to their great griefs. Their sorrows are immeasurable. Yet, when they have spoken they feel hungry and sit down to an ample meal. For as Achilles says of Niobe, 'She remembered to eat when she was worn out with weeping'. I am not certain that Shakespeare would have taken the risk, that he would have allowed so gross, implacable an intrusion of life.⁴⁹

It is toward 'the harvesting of complete truth' in their own lives that American poets of the past century direct the epics of Homer and Virgil.

Anthony Hecht: World Reflecting Self

In the early 1940s, Anthony Hecht was an undergraduate and literature major at Bard College,⁵⁰ before he was called away in the middle of his degree, to serve in the infantry in Europe in World War II.⁵¹ After the war, Hecht completed his education at Kenyon College and Columbia University, and became a professor of English literature, eventually returning to Bard in that capacity for five years (1962-1967). Among his teaching responsibilities there was a general education class for freshmen, called 'The Common Course'. Hecht remembers it as 'a "great ideas" course', in which Homer and Virgil were read in translation, alongside other 'more or less canonical texts', including works by Plato, the Buddha, and Heraclitus, as well as the Bible.⁵² The poet did study Latin and ancient history in high school, at elite, private institutions in New York City (including Horace Mann and Collegiate); however, it seems likely from his later poetic practice, that it was his experiences of reading and teaching epic in translation that most lingered in his consciousness, prompting an inclination to view

⁴⁹ Steiner in Auden et al. (1964), 85.

⁵⁰ Anthony Hecht (1923-2004) was an American professor of literature, and a major lyric poet of the past century. His mentors included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and W.H. Auden. He taught at Harvard, Yale, Kenyon College, Smith College, New York University, the University of Iowa, the University of Rochester and Georgetown University. He served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 1982-1984, and won numerous awards throughout his life, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1967 (for his volume of poetry *The Hard Hours*). Hecht spent a year at the American Academy in Rome in 1951 on a writing fellowship, and in 1973 published a translation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, in collaboration with the classicist Helen Bacon. For additional details about the poet's life, see Hecht & Hoy (1999).

⁵¹ Williams (1989), 26.

⁵² Hecht & Hoy (1999), 43-4.

modern life as analogous to the ancient stories, and to explore the possible insights accessible through that juxtaposition in lyric poems interweaving epic and personal scenes.

Although Hecht only wrote one ‘interweaving’ poem of the type described in this chapter,⁵³ it is (by my measure) a major piece, and an important example of this reception practice. ‘See Naples and Die’, from the volume *The Transparent Man* (1990), was published late in the poet’s life, toward the end of a very successful career. It is a 14-page lyrical, dramatic narrative, in six parts, in the voice of an unnamed man recalling the disenchantment with and failure of his marriage to a woman named Martha, as it emerged during a leisure trip to Naples years earlier.⁵⁴ Hecht explained in an essay that the goal of lyric poetry in general, in his mind, is to capture and make sense of the miraculous variety and wonder of phenomena in the immanent world (what he calls, ‘the rendering of the substantial particularity of the diverse elements that compose our world’).⁵⁵ He wrote of this effort:

The [lyric] poem wishes to pay its homage to the natural world, from which it derives and which it strives to imitate. And there is in nature a superfluity, an excess of texture which plays no necessary part in the natural economy. It may be that the bees are attracted by the color of the rose; but the rose is capable of so many exquisite gradations and modulations of color that they must surely exceed any practical end. And nature, or the power behind it, is full of such fine excesses. [...] Systems of theology refer this richness to some end. Poetry is sometimes more hesitant, but wishes to register such splendor, to imitate it, and presently to assign to it, in what may be the most tentative way, a sense of purposiveness.⁵⁶

This vivid rendering of reality on the page serves not only to inspire awe and pleasure in the senses, but also to reveal, or perhaps formulate, a view of the logical order underlying all things. In Hecht’s words again, the practice of descriptive lyric ‘can have no other effect than to require of us, not only a sense of the importance of particulars for their own sake, but a sense of their significant relationship to each other, which only the discourse of the poem can

⁵³ His other poems of Homeric-Virgilian reception include a translation of Du Bellay’s ‘Heureux Qui, Comme Ulysse’ (1967); ‘Death Demure’ (1997), speaking as death, comparing his voice to that of the Sirens enticing Odysseus; and ‘Poppy’ (2001), an epic simile about rage in war.

⁵⁴ The names of Hecht’s actual wives were Patricia and Helen, so the poem is not technically autobiographical. However, the fact that the poet’s first marriage did fail painfully (after which his former wife moved to Europe with his sons, and Hecht was hospitalised for depression) must surely have informed the voice and details of this male narrator in a similar position. Hecht has suggested that the exercise of ‘experiment[ing] with other voices than my own’ in poetry ‘encourage[s]’ him ‘to empathize with the experience of others’ (McClatchy (1988)). Perhaps experimenting with a voice other than his own, but very close to it in certain ways, enabled him to understand and feel compassion for his own experience.

⁵⁵ Hecht (1965), 491.

⁵⁶ Hecht (1965), 492.

describe. And this perhaps might be a form of knowledge'.⁵⁷ The consequence of this knowledge, as Hecht seems to understand it, is an almost sacred peacefulness for the knower, in perceiving a fundamental purpose and coherence regulating the otherwise confounding visible world. He explained:

The strength of a metaphor lies in the fact that it links two otherwise incommensurate and discontinuous realms of discourse in a revealing and persuasive way. [...] Metaphors] bring into persuasive, revealing and even persistent relationship dimensions of our experience which would otherwise be incommensurate and without bearing upon one another. They suggest to us in the most tentative way an order and design among the disparities of the universe; they hint at a homogeneity that we all piously hope is really there, and which we predicate our lives upon, and which science must take as a basic assumption.⁵⁸

I propose that Hecht's interweaving of modern, private, lyric observations with ancient, outward, epic episodes in 'See Naples and Die' serves this metaphorical, ordering function, of seeking and revealing an underlying design in the world, by linking two seemingly distant points of view. That the order revealed by this poetic method is, above all, a reflection of the significance and intelligibility of the self, will become clear through an examination of Hecht's poem, in comparison with Virgil's *Aeneid* 6.

Joseph Brodsky, who called Hecht 'without question, the best poet writing in English today',⁵⁹ noted with admiration his capacity for description:

Anthony Hecht's ability for visualization is absolutely extraordinary. It's not that his eye possesses both microscopic and telescopic capacity nor that his ear is infallible. In the case of this poet, we encounter, among other things, a unique development of the species: the total *identity* of the eye and the ear. While this poet sees, he speaks, and the word makes his eye linger on an object. The simultaneousness of this process animates the object and promotes it from the status of reality into a category, indeed into a state of mind. Or, to put it bluntly, into a vision, where the reality of this world, after all, belongs.⁶⁰

'See Naples and Die' participates exactly in this inquisitive goal. Indeed, it fits into the category of the traditional walk poem, an iconic form for description and self-awareness, in which the world is apprehended as a series of stimuli that appear to the senses in succession, as the poet-narrator moves with bodily vigour through natural space. In his useful volume on this lyric type, Roger Gilbert explained: 'The fundamental object of the walk is simply the world; not, that is, some particular segment of the world, such as a specific place or category

⁵⁷ Hecht (1965), 491-2.

⁵⁸ Hecht (1965), 497.

⁵⁹ Brodsky (1989), 49.

⁶⁰ Brodsky (1989), 49-50.

of places, but the world itself, conceived as the very horizon of experience'.⁶¹ The walk poem also explores the self, in the form of the observer or walker, whose own reactions to the scenery are inscribed on the page, thus recording his varieties, which combine to hint at his 'essence'. In addition, this form acknowledges and investigates the possible, unsettling gap between these two poles, self and world – that is, the nature of the world as but partially accessible to the perceiving self, who can glimpse it only in momentary fragments, and yet senses that it is whole, and the sole possible site for the experiences and existence of that self.⁶² In 'See Naples and Die', Hecht attempts to fill this gap by finding glimpses of the self in the world, thereby enabling him to extrapolate the whole self from the landscape, and the whole world within himself.

The poem is structured as a flashback, introduced by a narrator reflecting on his past experience of a deteriorating marriage, rereading his journal from that period. The opening lines read:

I can at last consider those events
Almost without emotion, a circumstance
That for many years I'd scarcely have believed.
We forget much, of course, and, along with facts,
Our strong emotions, of pleasure and of pain,
Fade into stark insensibility.
For which, perhaps, it need be said, thank God.
So I can read from my journal of that time
As if it were written by a total stranger.

The piece then proceeds through a series of present-tense episodes from that starkly unromantic trip to Naples, seemingly quoted from the journal itself, in which the possible analogy between the observed world and the troubled self is explored and illuminated by the mediating text (both journal, and other sources to which the poet-speaker alludes).

First, in the poem's section I, the couple are awaiting the call to lunch on a terrace, on 'a sunny day in April', 'seated under a trellised roof of vines', and aware of 'a light perfume/ From fields of wild-flowers far beyond our sight'. Spread out before them is 'the greatest amphitheater in the world: Naples and its Bay' (with its presentiment of death). It seems, initially, a lovely, promising scene; however, already an undercurrent of uneasiness is present

⁶¹ Gilbert (1991), 252.

⁶² Gilbert (1991), 260.

in the poet-narrator's imagery: the trellis is 'light-laced and freaked with grape-leaf silhouettes/ That romp and buck across the tablecloth' (the unusual verb 'freaked' meaning, to behave strangely); on the table 'the cheap knives blind us', presumably refracting the sunlight strongly into their eyes, but perhaps also figuring the initial blindness the couple suffers toward their disconnection from one another; when they are summoned inside to serve their plates, the narrator finds the 'blackness the more pronounced/ For the brilliance of out-doors', revealing a stark fissure between apparently adjoining spaces; and when they again return to the sunlight, 'carafes/ Of citrine wine glow with unstable gems,/ Prison the sun like genie in their holds,/ Enshrine their luminous spirits' – all entrapping, unnerving, dissonant language that represents, in the landscape, the emerging discord in the relationship. This subtle fracture between the couple's apparent happiness, and their underlying incongruity, is, furthermore, linked closely in this section to its textual counterpart – the male speaker's journal entry recreating the day. The journal-writer attests explicitly to the unity he perceives between his text, his surroundings, and his personal state:

[I] set it down that evening in the hotel
(Where I make my journal entries after dinner)
That everything we saw this afternoon
[...]
Bespoke an unassailable happiness.
And so it was. Or so I thought it was.

The character saw and recorded a close coincidence between the beauty that he observed in the Italian setting, and the stable contentment he felt in his marriage. That this apparent parallel between world and self, mediated and revealed by text, is unstable, however, is already clear from the final line above, which admits a wedge of doubt into the proposition, which will be shown increasingly to collapse as the poem progresses.

In section II, the poet-narrator reads the guidebook to Martha over breakfast, focusing on a seventeenth-century account of 'Naples' whores', 'female beggars/ With doped and rented children', and other unsavory figures from the city's history. Then, he encounters the modern-day equivalents in the streets, 'Neapolitan sinners': a young 'good-looking urchin', who leads him to a garishly dressed man in a back square, who offers to exchange his

currency, but instead trades the bills for a 'wad' of 'folded newspaper', while 'two thuggish observers' keep an intimidating watch from across the street, scaring him away before he has a chance to double-check the transaction. The speaker recalls (still quoting a past journal entry) that Martha 'thought me a gullible fool' after this mistake; and his own sense of self is also wounded by his oversight, since 'I pride myself on being a keen observer'. The enticing overlap between the text and the world (whereby the historical sinners from the 'battered guide-book' are suddenly animated on the modern streets, seeming to promise a clear reflection between reliable expectations and immanent reality) here crashes down in the moment of fraud, revealing instead a newly painful gap between apparent insight and actuality (since the turn of events does not reflect the poet's considered impression of himself as 'a keen observer', nor his wife's belief that he would avoid being 'a gullible fool').

Section III and IV continue to erode these would-be matrices of reality (world representing self, text clarifying world), and leave the narrator at a mounting loss for understanding. In section IV, the speaker admits that he and Martha had 'become reluctant witnesses', after a morning of restorative sunshine, 'to a straggling parade of freaks and mutants/ From a local hospital for the handicapped/ On a brief outing to the aquarium'. The lines that follow are a new, horrific version of the mirror motif that Hecht has already been developing so meticulously throughout the poem:

They are extraordinary: stunted, maimed,
Thalidomide deformities, small, fingerless,
Mild pigmentless albinos, shepherded
Into a squeaky file by earnest nuns
Between the sunlit bushes of azaleas.
They seem like raw material for the painting
Of Bosch's *Temptation of St. Anthony*:
Wild creatures, partly human, but with claws
Or camel humps, or shriveled, meager heads.
What they will see inside those glassy tanks
(Thick sullen eels, pale sea-anemones)
Will be no odder than what they are themselves.

The disquieting patients walking in the garden reflect, in the speaker's mind, not only another, strange plane of reality (the oceanic landscape), but also an artistic interpretation of an unsettling plane of reality. Again, the world seems intelligible through its metaphorical order. Martha, however, is shaken by this sight, and 'has disappeared'. When the narrator

recovers her in their room, and attempts to counsel her ('life required us to steel ourselves/ To the all-too-sad calamities of others,/ The brute, inexplicable inequities'), she groans, and 'then she gave me/ A look the like of which I can't describe'. Despite the man's most earnest attempts (in the moment; afterward in his journal; and in the later commentary on his journal that is this poem) to make sense of the 'inexplicable' world and its manifold 'inequities', by finding continuities that make it appear coherent, he fails to achieve the crucial, consoling leap between the world (depicted in text), and an illumination of self (accessed through that text): although he strove to find its analogue in the scene and text, he cannot grasp what Martha feels.

It is in section V that the poem arrives at its Virgilian intertext, which is (I propose) its essential inspiration for the project of exploring self by relating it to the world, and to the world as revealed in textual intercession. Section V begins with an abandonment of the journal, and a new reliance on memory:

Somewhere along in here, deeply depressed,
I ceased making journal entries, so what follows
Is pretty much an uncertain reconstruction[.]

The narrator here acknowledges with dejection the gap between text and world, the impossibility of accurately recording or interpreting the events of a human life through exterior sources. In the episode that follows, construed from memory, the speaker and Martha travel with 'a guide' to sites in 'the surrounding countryside', including a place 'known in the ancient texts as *Charon's Cave*', where 'a man and a mongrel' together enact 'the ghastly and traditional death-scene', whereby the dog is held close to the fumes rising from the ground ('the stink of Dis'), falls limp from the intoxicating chemicals, and then recovers consciousness, appearing resurrected. The guide next encourages the couple to visit 'Avernus', 'the stinking lake/ No bird can fly across', as well as 'the Cave/ of Cumaean Sibyl'; but they 'insist/ That we have had enough of caves and smells', and instead choose to undertake 'A little tour of the Elysian Fields'. Recalling Virgil, the speaker anticipates a lovely contrast to the stinking cave:

Virgil has made it seem a lovely place,

A heroes' health-club, a gymnasium
 Of track-stars, wrestlers, athletes, all engaged
 In friendly contest, sun-tanned rivalry.
 Here, too, convened all those distinguished ghosts
 Who had bettered life by finding out new truths,
 Inventing melodies or making verses,
 At home in a faultless landscape of green meadows
 Watered by streams of dazzling clarity.

These lines are a loose remembrance of *Aeneid* 6.640-68, and present an easy, pleasant prospect, that the man trusts will yield ready parallels in the scenery before them. Instead, he admits bluntly, 'What we saw was something different':

It was a vacant wilderness of weeds,
 Thistles and mulberries, with here and there
 Poplars, quite shadeless; thick, ramshackle patches
 Of thorny amaranth, tousled by vines.
 This wild, ungoverned growth, this worthless, thick,
 And unsuppressible fecundity
 Was dotted with a scattering of graves
 Of the most modest sort: worn, simple stones
 From which all carving had been long effaced,
 And under which the mute, anonymous dead
 Slept in supreme indifference to the green
 Havoc about them, the discourse of guides,
 The bewildered tourists, acres of desolation.

In other words, the spirits of this actual site (unlike the shades in Virgil's Elysium, who crowd around the Sibyl to aid her inquiry about Anchises) make no effort to assist the human sufferers. This speaker longs for resolution of, or insight into, the natural 'havoc' all around, the unreliable 'discourse of guides' (which led them to this shatteringly disappointing place), and their own 'bewilder[ment]' in the face of 'acres of desolation'. Far from providing a comforting reflection of the human self in the mirror of the world, or offering a lucid, textual construal of the situation, these ghosts are 'mute', 'anonymous', and asleep 'in supreme indifference', beneath 'simple' (rather than astute) gravestones 'from which all carving had been long effaced'. This image concludes the section: the human self abandoned in the desolate world, with no intervening source of insight into his predicament. The gap between self and reality has been expanded here into an unbridgeable chasm.

Yet, in the final section (VI), Hecht's narrator apprehends the true revelation in this crushing scene. Speaking from the present day, when the marriage has long since dissolved, he lingers on the visit to Elysium:

What sticks in the mind, what I cannot escape,
Is the setting in which we found ourselves that day
I first began to see us as outcast:
The ugliness of the landscape, the conviction
That no painter would think it worth a glance.

The barren, unexceptional site of the 'Elysian Fields' beyond Naples apparently warrants no analysis by an artist; however, the speaker himself has just recorded it at length in the previous section, as a memorable, revealing text. Furthermore, its 'ugliness' might seem alienating in theory, but 'the setting' in fact corresponds to the very 'day/ I first began to see us as outcast', 'the landscape' itself signifying the moment of his disenchantment with the supposed intricacies of interwoven realities of world and self. The world is, in fact, a reflection of the self, but of its pain and ordinary emptiness, rather than its 'unassailable happiness', as it had seemed in the opening section, at lunch on the hillside terrace. That texts can, indeed, participate in this dark correlation is affirmed in the concluding turn, in which the poet-speaker invokes one final source in illustrating his realization:

Such was the vision I received that day,
Raised, as it chanced, to perhaps the ultimate power
By reading the letters of the Younger Pliny.

Apparently Pliny recounts a night on which his 'distinguished uncle' stood on 'this promontory' overlooking the bay ('just where I had been', adds the speaker), and witnessed an eruption of the volcano, which filled the night air with smoke and flames and 'falling rocks'. In the closing lines of the poem, Hecht's narrator recreates that ancient scene of natural disaster:

Of all those strange sights the most ominous
Was perhaps the sudden vision of the sea
Sucked out and drained away by the earthquake
That was part of the eruption, leaving a sea-bed
Of naked horrors lighted now and then
By jets of fire and sheet-lightning flares,
Only to be folded back into the dark.
One could make out in such brief intervals
An endless beach littered with squirming fish,
With kelp and timbers strewn on muddy flats,
Giant sea-worms bright with a glittering slime,
Crabs limping in their rheumatoid pavane.

In section IV, when the male speaker was clumsily comforting Martha about the invalid patients in the garden, he insisted 'that life required us to steel ourselves/ To the all-too-sad

calamities of others,/ The brute, inexplicable inequities,/ To form for ourselves a carapace of sorts,/ A self-preservative petrific toughness'. In this final moment, this discerning 'vision' of the sea-bed laid bare to the flaming sky, the exposed 'crabs' – the very model of creatures shielded by 'a carapace', a 'petrific toughness' – 'limp' along the sand 'in their rheumatoid pavane', struggling through an awkward, stilted dance of dignity, an attempt at order in an inexplicable world. These crabs perfectly distill the view of reality to which the speaker has been tending over the course of the poem: the world, the text and the self are, after all, closely linked and illuminating of one another, although the proffered insight is wretched and upsetting, in the end.

Jorie Graham: The Vanishing Gap

Even more intently than Anthony Hecht, Jorie Graham is a poet of intense gaze,⁶³ whose central poetic impulse is toward insight, the desire to apprehend the qualities of existence as deeply and broadly, wholly and precisely, as possible, in the hope of finding in the accuracy of that vision some glimpse of clarity or understanding, in the face of the otherwise inexplicable vastness and variety of phenomena. Graham quietly laments in an interview: 'I often feel like giving up. I don't know why I don't except that I have family I love and students to whom I feel accountable. I have hope that, in the end, it will all make sense – the over abundance, the scarcity, the apparent meaninglessness, the incredible urge to harm, the terror of others. And the envy – worst of all the emotions, and most hidden'.⁶⁴ It is her tireless drive to uncover the elusive or 'hidden' facets of reality, which for her

⁶³ Jorie Graham (1950-) is an important living American poet. Born in New York City and raised in Italy, Graham was educated in Rome and Paris, before attending New York University for her undergraduate degree (with a major in filmmaking), and the Iowa Writers' Workshop for her MFA. 'She has won almost every fellowship and award an American poet can win' (Casper (2001), 189), including the 1996 Pulitzer Prize, for her volume of selected poems, *The Dream of the Unified Field*. In 1999 she replaced Seamus Heaney as the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard, and became the first woman ever to hold that post. For further details about Graham's life, see her interview in the Paris Review, Gardner (2003a).

⁶⁴ Graham, 'Q&A'.

encompasses both the self and the surrounding world, separate but in contact,⁶⁵ that shapes Graham's poetics.

As her career has progressed, the poet has become increasingly explicit about the moral and political possibilities of this process of finding out and showing, believing it to be a crucial stance of poetry against the escalating disintegration of awareness and connection in the modern world, a carelessness which (she deeply believes) will eventually lead to the destruction of the planet and the species.⁶⁶ Poetry, for Graham, is the resisting bulwark: 'Poetry tries to break through, to make reality feel real', in the hope of inspiring people to rally to the defence of the suffering planet, before it is too late. In explaining her aim in the volume *Sea Change* (2008), which are poems explicitly about the shifting climate, she states: 'I have written it in order to make myself not only understand – we all seem to "understand" – but to actually "feel" (and thus physically believe) what we have and what we are losing'.⁶⁷

Graham uses recorded form as a call to presence – an exercise in living in a moment of time to the utmost degree, and a system for methodically chronicling all of the possible connotations and layers of an experience. She describes the poem as a heightened form of awareness:

As I would put it, you are not the narrator but the protagonist of your poem. You undergo it. It is an encounter with the so-called subject – I prefer Stevens' word 'occasion'. [...] Whatever it is you think you know, the whole purpose of the tools of the poem, of 'technique', the essence of its activity and desire, is to find out what there is in experience that the sheer living of it, however brutal and profound, your whole being might have 'missed'. There is more in experience than 'experience' gives us.⁶⁸

To attempt this holistic presence, she consciously employs 'all my senses, not just my eyes',⁶⁹ and she admonishes aspiring poets to do the same: 'Walk, look, smell, taste, touch, listen. Get your body back. [...] We all need to work on staying awake. This is a somnolent era. Growing more so. [...] Avoid living too much in the conceptual intellect at the expense of

⁶⁵ Graham attests: 'I have an abiding belief that an untrammled contact point between the mind and nature is possible. I just believe it' (Blackie (2012), 39).

⁶⁶ See Gardner (2003a).

⁶⁷ Wengen (2008).

⁶⁸ Blackie (2012), 41.

⁶⁹ Cahill (1996).

your body – the “thinky death” [as] Berryman calls it’.⁷⁰ Above all, the poem – the moment of acute consciousness in space, inscribed on the page – must act on the poet, as much as the poet’s consciousness interacts with its surroundings. In Graham’s visionary phrase: ‘Description is an attempt to go out into it and come back changed’,⁷¹ to activate and gain acquaintance with the whole, undivided self, in the process of grasping the world in which it moves.⁷²

The poems that result from this awakened arousal are what Helen Vendler called ‘intense and lavish transcriptions of the material world’ (of which the self is an incongruous part, embedded in and yet perceiving of),⁷³ and what Graham terms ‘rather large exfoliations of what I would take to be an instant of time’.⁷⁴ She creates intricate patterns within her lyric work (‘orienting grids of thought’, in Vendler’s words),⁷⁵ framing remarks within parentheses and passages within other passages, encoding the implied, encroaching silence that surrounds the known world in blank space on the page, dividing poems into a series of numerical sections, and often giving several different phrases for a single observation in quick succession, as if ‘hoping to find adequate language for the given’.⁷⁶ On this last tendency, Vendler remarked: ‘[Graham] grew up in Italy, though born of American parents – a Jewish-American artist mother and an Irish-American writer father. To borrow a phrase from Seamus Heaney, is it any wonder that when she thought she would have second thoughts?’⁷⁷ Graham herself acknowledges the impossibility of perfect apprehension, despite striving:

You have to undertake an act which you know is essentially futile in the direct sense: the words are not going to seize the thing. But what leaks in between the attempts at seizure is the

⁷⁰ Wengen (2008).

⁷¹ Gardner (1999).

⁷² That it is her own, personal self that Graham seeks to locate, is confirmed by the poet in interview: ‘I could say I would like to find a way to stay out of the picture – but that is one of those theoretical positions which are interesting as hell but just academic. The truth is, you are the one speaking. You are the one accountable. [...] You are free to call yourself a “site of intersections”, all you want. No one can deny it. It is also true, in its way. But is it deeply true? Is it morally the most demanding position? I do not think so. [...] For me, it feels like too much self-accountability is lifted. The problematic self is heavy, it is there in one’s shoulders, on one’s soul – it is no illusion. It is vertiginous, horrific. It is, as Yeats would have it, one’s dying animal’ (Grubisic (2010)).

⁷³ Vendler (1995), 129.

⁷⁴ Gardner (2003a).

⁷⁵ Vendler (1995), 94.

⁷⁶ Vendler (1995), 94.

⁷⁷ Vendler (1995), 91.

thing, and you have to be willing to suffer the limits of description in order to get it. [...] It's like the old idea that the only way to experience faith is through active doubt. You have to undertake the encounter with the 'monument', and it has to remain essentially unknowable.⁷⁸

This fragmentary, splintered picture is the only view of reality possible for the human self, and therefore will suffice.

Graham's poetic interweavings of epic and modern scenes participate in this project of partial, but fervent, insight. The poet was not a formal classicist, but appears to have encountered ancient epic in her secondary schooling, and most likely again as an undergraduate, in translation. Her observations about myth link it repeatedly to her explorations of personal identity. For instance, in the Paris Review interview, she cites her impression of the layered, living presentness of human history:

I did absorb the sense of history that bears down so crucially on everything there [during her childhood in Rome]. And the sense of living in a particular point in that history [...] was utterly pulverized by my sense of the dimensions of prior times, lives, and actions that swelled up through that city. [...] I remember most vividly a game I played: I sat above the 'current humans' in the room below and loved to imagine the eighteenth-century house beneath 'this' house and its people, the Renaissance house and its people, the Medieval house and its people – all the while trying to summon the whole city around the house – sights, sounds, smells, events, domestic acts – what I had read in history books, what I had translated from Latin, what I had seen in frescoes, paintings. Then down to the Roman one – even at this point the actual dwelling I was sitting in didn't fail me. Then the pre-Roman, and so on, back to the forests – my mind wandering up north to the great forests and the northern tribes, then over my left shoulder to Greece – the Aegean Sea, the battles, the gods, Apollo – all the myths would flood in over the landscape which resembled in no way the country our lycée's spring vacation trip had taken us to see. Those myths had a very firm grip on me, as did the *Odyssey*, later the *Iliad*.⁷⁹

Graham goes on to describe repeating this imaginative exercise in her adult life, while nursing her infant daughter in the dead of night in Iowa, and during summers in the Wyoming wilderness, where her new family built a rustic cabin. This anecdote reveals the vital, constant connection that Graham appears to be able to feel with technically distant planes of experience, which she summons into the present moment, as an unbroken chain of analogues for her own place in the world. Elsewhere, the poet suggests that she uses such ancient models in poetry to investigate her own motivations and nature:

When I write from Daphne's point of view [, for instance,] it's not out of a love of myth, or out of some theoretical take on her, or for any other reason than that I 'feel' or am 'trying to feel', what it would be like to be so pursued, so trapped, so finally stilled. And whether there is any way to survive that. Whether I could be a tree – be stilled into another life form. What

⁷⁸ Gardner (1999).

⁷⁹ Gardner (2003a).

that all ‘means’ comes later, much later, after the anger and loss and all the other emotions that are summoned have trawled through me, found voice, stained tone, made themselves felt in syntax, occasioned action of mind, turned the poem, shaped argument.⁸⁰

This spontaneous, emotional, inquisitive impulse to imagine herself as a classical exemplar shapes Graham’s receptions of Homeric epic. We shall take her remarkable poem ‘Ravel and Unravel’, from the volume *The End of Beauty* (1987), as an example. In this two-page lyric work, the poet likens herself (or a close poetic persona), examining and interpreting the details of the world around her on a hike in the mountains, to Homer’s Penelope, alternately weaving and unraveling a fabric scene on the loom.⁸¹ The poem begins abruptly:

So that it’s right, isn’t it, that she should come to love it best,
the unraveling, every night,
the hills and cypresses turning back
into thread, then patience again, then...
is it emptiness?
All the work of the eyes and breath and fingertips that forced the three dimensions down
into each other going now, all of an instant, back
to what other
place? (lines 1-10)

The poet then introduces herself (or her persona), establishing a clear parallel between the two women:

Because we were lost, taking our time, today,
taking the long way back
from looking for the Indian petroglyphs we knew were there
but couldn’t find, alone in the miles, the wind
kissing the rocks
to translate them down.
You walked ahead, navigating, lost one, carrying
Emily, all cargo now that I
am emptied finally
of all but my own
undoing (lines 11- 21)

This family (husband, wife, and small daughter) have gone out for a hike, searching for hidden symbols (‘the Indian petroglyphs we knew were there/ but couldn’t find’). The

⁸⁰ Graham, ‘Q&A’.

⁸¹ This poem is related to Graham’s other, more widely studied lyric reception of epic from the same volume, ‘Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay (Penelope at Her Loom)’, which is narrated in the first person, in the voice of Penelope, again exploring the advancing and retreating aspects of her activity, experience, and nature. For informative readings of that poem, see Gardner (2005), Spiegelman (2007) and Hurst (2009). For the only published reading I have found of ‘Ravel and Unravel’, see Gardner (2003b), from which my reading differs on most points. Graham’s poems ‘Oblivion Aubade’ and ‘Sea-blue Aubade’ (both from *The Errancy*, 1997) include references to what she calls (in the notes to the volume) ‘the Odysseus story’; and ‘Underneath (Calypso)’ (*Swarm*, 2000) is spoken in the voice of the goddess – but these three poems do not count as ‘interweavings’ of modern and epic settings, in the category of this chapter. The fact that Graham refers to Homer as a source of ‘myth’ and ‘story’ in her notes suggests that she is engaging with the epic as a fluid, cultural memory, rather than as a concrete, specific text.

wisdom of these ancient sources eludes the hikers, but is subtly unlocked by ‘the wind’, which appears to the speaker to be ‘kissing the rocks’ (rushing gently across the stony landscape, perhaps even across the elusive petroglyphs, which the wind can locate), in order ‘to translate them down’, in other words, to offer access to the feeble human seekers. Here Graham establishes the breach between the mysteriously meaningful world, and the excluded human self, who strives (‘alone in the miles’) to interpret the immanent signs correctly, but achieves only a partial glimpse (in this case a ‘translation’ of the petroglyphs by the initiated, omniscient wind).

The woman, walking behind her husband and young daughter (Graham’s real daughter is named Emily, too), attempts a step toward greater insight, by emptying herself out of everything except her own ‘undoing’. The word ‘undoing’ links her unmistakably back to Penelope, whose own ‘unraveling’ provides the opening image of the poem. Indeed, Penelope is also described as valuing a sort of ‘emptiness’ (‘is it emptiness?’), which arises after she has woven her decorated cloth with ‘patience’, and then unwoven it again (‘the hills and cypresses turning back/ into thread’). The sensation in that moment of fulfilled dissolution, when the artful fabric has been completely dissolved back into meaningless thread (‘All the work of the eyes and breath and fingertips that forced the three dimensions down/ into each other going now, all of an instant, back/ to what other/ place?’), is perplexing (twice in these lines Graham uses a question mark), and yet delicious, the state of existence that Penelope has understandably learned to cherish over any other (‘it’s right, isn’t it, that she should come to love it best’). On the rocky hike, Graham too dissolves her own fabrications, her efforts at creating an intelligible picture or description or interpretation, or a detached self-image. Using the remembered example of Homer’s heroine to guide her in comprehending this radical choice of creative reversal and the possible satisfaction that it might yield, this woman knowingly reverses the usual, human process of self-construction (by which the self is perceived to be separate from the surrounding world, and thus becomes so), emptying herself out of all such limiting, mental formulations, and instead reveling in the possibility of

impersonal emptiness, which leaves her in possession only of her own liberating action ('my own/ undoing').

Now enters a second point of comparison:

like the sun rising over these gigantic rock formations
coming to touch, in time, every millimeter
of every declivity, rounding, pronouncing them
into the emptiness. (lines 22-25)

In her self-emptied, selfless state, the speaker becomes 'like the sun', which traverses 'these giant rock formations' dispassionately, and is thus able 'to touch, in time, every millimeter/ of every declivity'. Unlike the hiking family, who are powerless to find the 'Indian petroglyphs', despite their conviction of proximity, the empty sun can effortlessly apprehend the whole, vast landscape of stones, seeing clearly that the rocks are similarly barren of feeling ('pronouncing them/ into the emptiness'), like meeting like in perfect transparency, without the intervening haze of human thoughts to occlude the vision.

Having experienced this merging with the impersonal sun, the speaker is suddenly bewildered about her role in the world:

So that I don't know if the cry was one I heard or
realized, clinging to the windy unsaid as it did,
hovering in, and diving madly from, the possible, the poverty,
wild, high-pitched, mewing and hissing and
knifing down
from two young eagles
into the heart. (lines 26-32)

She cannot determine, at first, whether the cry of the eagles is a phenomenon in the outside world, observed by the attentive self ('heard'), or a facet of the world-as-self, a ripple within immanent space that she, as a seamless part of that impersonal space, has manifested ('realized'). The final line above, however, drops the speaker's awareness back down into her small, separate self. Unable to sustain the illusion of being emptied out into the wide, encompassing world, she is again painfully enclosed in her peculiar humanity, feeling a sharp pain of wonder as the eagles' screech 'knif[es] down/ [...] into the heart'. Furthermore, this cry underscores the unfathomable tranquility of physical phenomena, in contrast to the impetuous yearning of the human spirit:

It made me hear how clean the sky around them was of

anything I might have trapped it with. (lines 37-8)

Unlike human vigilance (especially a poet's vigilance, as Graham defines it), the world is 'clean' of any entrapping force, any differentiated self-consciousness that seeks to record, define and comprehend the import of itself, in its particularity. The female speaker may seek to 'translate' her surroundings for her own knowledge, but the serene sky around the eagles makes no such grasping effort.

Then, the infant daughter Emily begins to cry, echoing but contrasting with the eagles, and the mother senses the deep gulf between those two actions:

I heard her cry not add itself
to this enclosure of an emptiness
growing more empty as the minutes flick. I heard
how it stood for strength and was not of that strength.
Unlike that screech, that ancient breath
with a shape above me,
it was desire.
I could hear how she and her cry went separate ways,
one to be lost, one to be wholly
found out, word for word, taking the place of the sky. (lines 41-50)

Unlike the eagles' impersonal shriek, which knifed down into the human heart, but willingly left the sky untouched, this child's cry appears (to Graham's speaker) to embody the essence of human isolation: desire ('it was desire'). This sound asserts the division between itself and its surroundings (it did 'not add itself' to the world's 'emptiness', but instead 'it stood for strength' apart), but immediately grapples to overcome that painful gap, to grasp the world completely, to touch it 'word for word', even to depose it, 'taking the place of the sky'.

Gardner traces these lines back to Wallace Stevens' renowned poem 'The Idea of Order at Key West', and reads them as the crux of Graham's meaning:

Graham began the poem musing about Penelope's attraction to the undoing of form. She felt that attraction as well when the first screech let her hear the sky's freedom and difference, and felt it again as the sky disappeared under the second cry's desire to have and know and shape and complete. [...] What 'Ravel and Unravel' asks is if there is a way of making form that can draw from the eagles' announcement of a world 'clean' of human trappings and 'alive, more than / alive' without needing to move immediately to the drive to make it beautiful, knowable, useable. That is, to return to Stevens' poem, it asks if a space for poetry can be opened up between acknowledging the world's acute vanishings and fixing them in 'emblazoned zones'.⁸²

⁸² Gardner (2003b).

This desire – ‘to have and know and shape and complete’, to fashion from the observed world something ‘beautiful, knowable, useable’ – is a conflicted impulse for Graham in life. On one hand, she obviously engages in an ardent search for clarity, throughout her poetic corpus; on the other, she senses that unchecked human craving is the cause of the earth’s suffering. She acknowledges this ambiguity, in reference to her sixteen summers in the Wyoming wilderness: ‘Most of my poetry has spent its time trying to figure out what “being” is – human “being” and non-human “being”. How do they go together. Can they. What on earth is human desire. I knew even then desire was our illness, as well as our stunning spark. It has turned out to be more our illness. Our terminal illness. What can I say. That is what I write from and about’.⁸³

This conflict, and the possibility that a person might unhook from her desire for personal possession (in this case, understanding) and instead merge with the vast, impersonal awareness of the wider world, is posited once more in the final lines of the poem:

Her body opens, burns,
at the edge of each rock each cliff
where the dust is pulling free,
wild in the air again
momentarily,
all arms, the light touching round each mote, each grain, alive, more than
alive. . . . (lines 58-64)

The speaker here imagines a different choice for her crying daughter, and by extension herself: rather than grasping toward the world with her singular voice, she could instead crack ‘open’, ‘burn’ like the illuminating sun, and ‘touch’ the specks of dust swirling in the air, joining with them (‘all arms’) in a more total, more true reality (‘alive, more than alive’) than the fragmented, oppositional version that the lone human self can embody. These lines are a gorgeous celebration of the deeply living quality of the unbroken, inanimate world: the dust is ‘wild in the air’, ‘all arms’, ‘each grain, alive’, and ‘the light’ is ‘touching round’ it all, in a sensual gesture of absolute intimacy, with no gap between knower and known. But then, the poem folds back into the human self:

Then the beautiful, the view all round us, with that crimp of use in it,
then the husband minutes bearing down, bearing down – (lines 65-6)

⁸³ Blackie (2012), 41.

Although, in this poem, Graham's speaker has exulted in the possibility of fusing with the observed world (an experience accessed through the epic example of Penelope, who originated the process of unraveling one's own perspective), she is here weighed down by her human self, in the end, and brought back into her own, limited stance, whereby the surrounding 'view' is warped by concern only for its usefulness ('the crimp of use in it'). These concluding lines are a diminishing but open-ended meditation on the contrast between the caressing, feminine sun ('the beautiful', that effortless, engulfing warmth and freedom of the natural world), and 'the husband minutes', the rigid, masculine, human constraint of structured time. On a bodily level (as Graham hopes her work will register with readers, to reawaken sensation),⁸⁴ this poem triggers a soaring, unforgettable lift; and this shutting down at the close seems more a chilly warning than a finality.

Alan Shapiro: Remembrance of Solace

As a final example of a modern American poet whose lyric receptions of epic were seemingly shaped by assumptions of timelessness encountered in undergraduate translation courses, consider Alan Shapiro.⁸⁵ In a recent email, Shapiro emphasises the non-specialist nature of his classical education:

I grew up with no exposure to ancient epic, at least not of the Greek and Latin kind. Lower middle class child of a meat dealer and secretary, there were more televisions in my childhood home than books. My late sister was the first person in the family to go to college; I was the second. [...] And even for me college was hardly an intellectual endeavor. I went to college to play basketball (and to end the Vietnam War!). I didn't become a reader until my junior or senior year. [...] In the early nineties Peter Burian, a classics professor at Duke, asked me if I would co-edit the Oxford Greek Tragedy in New Translation Series. [...] From [19]93-94 I read nothing but Greek Epic and tragedy and as much secondary literature as I had time for.

⁸⁴ See Gardner (1999).

⁸⁵ Alan Shapiro (1952-) is a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and an award-winning living poet, whose themes include love, loss, grief and remembrance, especially in the context of the family. He received his undergraduate degree from Brandeis University, and has published ten volumes of poetry, as well as memoirs and collections of essays. Since the early 1990s, he has served as co-editor (with classicist Peter Burian) of the Greek Tragedy in New Translation series for Oxford University Press in the U.S., for which he has contributed translations of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* (2003) and Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (2009). For details about the poet's life, see his frank memoir, *The Last Happy Occasion* (Shapiro (1996)).

[...] That's really when I learned something substantial about antiquity. I have no training, however; and what Latin and Greek I have I've picked up on the fly, in the midst of editing that series with Peter. Greek and Latin literature wasn't taught in the public high school I attended or at Brandeis U. where I went to college. I first read Homer in a Humanities course my freshman year and was too young and stupid to appreciate it. I have only a BA; no graduate degree at all. I'm a rank amateur. What I know (and it isn't much) I've learned pretty much on my own.⁸⁶

The poet's condemnation of his shortfalls as an interpreter of classical texts stands in stark contrast to the profound insightfulness and beauty of his lyric receptions of epic. In eight short poems on Homeric-Virgilian themes, Shapiro interweaves details from the ancient stories with scenes of modern life (often his own), collapsing the historical distance between those settings, and finding in the clear poignant commonalities between present and mythical figures, a kind of tenuous solace in the face of overwhelming pain.⁸⁷

This search for insight into present troubles, by exploring literary examples, appears to motivate Shapiro's reading practices, in general. He contended, in the prologue to his creative memoir *The Last Happy Occasion* (a work that he defines as 'a personal testimony to the power of poetry to alter how we live'),⁸⁸ that art illuminates life in overlooked but essential ways, and even shapes it:

Literary works and art in general, [Eugenio] Montale says [in 'The Second Life of Art'], attain their goal and achieve their form only as they circulate within our lives, in their obscure pilgrimage in memory and conscience, 'mirroring themselves in that particular situation of life which made them possible.' Isn't it, I asked my friends, an article of faith among those of us devoted to the study of literature that it's good to know a lot of stories and poems, that literature can change our lives, color our perceptions, alter the way we see and therefore act in the world? We pay lip service to the transformative power of art, but we almost never describe how and in what specific ways we ourselves have been transformed by the art we love. [...] Part autobiographical, part meditation, [this] book would trace the circulating current of that interaction.⁸⁹

This impulse to connect life and art seems, also, to arise in Shapiro's teaching methods (or his frustrations with the obstacles to teaching, in the context of modern American universities).

⁸⁶ Email from 28 August 2012, in response to my query about the nature of his exposure to Homer and Virgil in the classroom.

⁸⁷ Shapiro's epic receptions include 'Virgil's Descent' (1991), 'Calypso, Penelope' (1996), 'Lethe' (1996), 'Hecuba' (1996), 'On Men Weeping' (1997), 'Aphrodite' (2000), 'The Bath' (2000), 'Hermes' (2000), 'Furies' (2000) and 'Homeric Turns' (2010). Of these, most are interweavings in the category of this chapter, apart from 'Calypso, Penelope' (spoken in the voice of Odysseus, reflecting upon his romantic choices) and 'Aphrodite' (psychologising a love-scene between the goddess and Anchises).

⁸⁸ Shapiro (1996), 223.

⁸⁹ Shapiro (1996), 1-2. In this memoir, the poet uses examples from Homer to illustrate personal experiences on four occasions (162-4, 179-80, 182-4) – including a reference to himself as 'a middle-class American Odysseus disguised not as a beggar, but as the next best thing, a university professor' (189).

In an essay calling for the reform of creative writing programs, Shapiro urged academics not to abandon the aesthetic perspective on literature (in favor of skeptical historicism, whereby the text is interrogated ‘as cultural artifact whose aesthetic features often mask political, racial, and sexual biases’):

Skeptical detachment is not the only attitude to bring to literary works. [...] When applied to literature, a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ in and of itself, despite its intellectual sophistication, is as crudely incomplete as a sympathetic imagination divorced from the disciplines of intellectual and historical inquiry. Both habits of mind ought to sustain and nourish one another.⁹⁰

Shapiro entertains hope (sometimes thwarted) that his undergraduate students will activate their own ‘sympathetic imagination’ toward syllabus texts. He recounted the disappointments of his teaching experience:

In the classroom there’s nothing more discouraging than seeing what you regard as a rich account of what it means to be alive reduced to a dry academic exercise discussed, by teacher as well as student, as though it had been written to be interpreted by a class. [...] It’s not that most students are too inexperienced to appreciate the emotional sophistication. [...] It’s rather that [...] they have no genuine sense of their mortality; unconsciously, most young students think they’ll live forever. [...] So you talk about technique, structure, history, patterns of influence, and hope that they’ll discover at some later time, when they’ve grown more aware of their own experience, that good poetry can help them clarify and understand their lives.⁹¹

That this urge to link the text with actual life events drives his poetic practice, as well, is not a great leap, and indeed is borne out in an interview. Speaking to *The Atlantic* in 2002, Shapiro attests: ‘To the best of my understanding, everything I’ve written has been written in a spirit of understanding and sympathy, in an attempt to gain some kind of clarity about a very confusing and painful situation’ (for instance, ‘the breakup of my own marriage of sixteen years under very difficult circumstances, circumstances coinciding with my brother’s illness’ and subsequent death).⁹² This nebulous clarity through empathic understanding, furthermore, yields a version of solace, not true recompense for loss or anguish, but a gesture toward it, no less irresistible for being imprecise and insufficient. In Shapiro’s words: ‘I can’t embrace the belief that art redeems our losses, nor can I afford to live without it’.⁹³ The poet’s lyric

⁹⁰ Shapiro (1992), 12.

⁹¹ Shapiro (1993), 153.

⁹² McHenry (2002).

⁹³ McHenry (2002).

receptions of Homer and Virgil participate in, and perhaps uniquely facilitate, this program of consolation by way of ‘sympathetic imagination’, as an example will serve to illustrate.

Shapiro’s poem ‘Lethe’ (from *Mixed Company*, 1996), a short lyric of four stanzas, each consisting of six lines, is a memorable and affecting model of his reception practice: seeking solace for a grave personal trouble, by returning to ancient epic. In this case, the poem alludes to and quotes from Aeneas’ reunion with his father in the underworld, specifically the lines in which the hero observes a crowd of spirits waiting on the shores of the river Lethe, hoping to be reborn (*Aen.* 6.703-21). Shapiro’s modern version begins in the voice of a husband,⁹⁴ recalling a dark period in his marriage:

You called me to come see the bees. Come out of the house
you called once, in a bad time, when we were lost to each other,
blurred by habitual regard, disgruntled and aloof
though not from injuries, but from a hoarded sense
of being injured, precious so long as vague, vague
so long as silent. (stanza 1)

In addition to establishing the tremulous, sombre tone of this relationship in just a few short lines (‘Come out of the house’ has a pleading, lingering cadence, quoting the voice of the wife, and the phrases ‘precious so long as vague,/ vague so long as silent’ are a slow fugue), this stanza subtly reveals the initial link to Virgil, the entry point for Shapiro’s remembrance of the *Aeneid*. This scene from a marriage occurs ‘in a bad time’, ‘when we were lost to each other’, ‘blurred by habitual regard’ – not unlike the circumstances in *Aeneid* 6, in which Aeneas is reunited with his lost father only for a fleeting, surreal conversation, during which Anchises’ shade ‘three times [...] untouched slipped through his hands,/ Weightless as wind and fugitive as dream’ (*Aen.* 6.700-2).⁹⁵ The husband and wife of Shapiro’s tale are likewise ‘blurred’, unable to grasp one another in substance.

⁹⁴ This character is a persona, but appears to have close personal relevance for Shapiro. In context within the volume, the poem ‘Lethe’ divides a trio of poems about a wife (‘Wife: Labor’, ‘Wife: The Good Daughter’, ‘Wife: The Mirror’), from a pair of poems about a newly made ex-wife (‘Ex-Wife: Infatuation’, and ‘Ex-Wife: Homesickness’), all of which were possibly inspired by the arc of the poet’s own divorce.

⁹⁵ Fitzgerald (1981). Elsewhere in the thesis, I quote from the prose translation West (1990). In this section on Shapiro, however, I quote from the poetic version of R. Fitzgerald, since it seems clear (from the final line of ‘Lethe’, which is a direct quotation from Fitzgerald) that this is the text from which Shapiro worked in composing his poem.

The speaker obeys his wife's summons, and describes the scene awaiting him in the garden:

By the marigolds you planted they were all hovering,
hundreds of bees, it seemed, like bright flecks of the lavish
blossoms they were drawn to, each long stalk tipping over
under the pressure as they clung together, crowded and swarmed
the way Vergil says the souls do by the waters
in Elysium: (stanza 2)

These lines compare the bees in the modern garden, to the souls in Virgil's underworld; but of course in the original text, Virgil compares the souls by the banks of the river Lethe, to peaceful bees in a summertime meadow:

Interea videt Aeneas in valle reducta
seclusum nemus et virgulta sonantia silvae,
Lethaeumque domos placidas qui praenatat amnem.
hunc circum innumerae gentes populi que volabant:
ac veluti in pratis ubi apes aestate serena
floribus insidunt variis et candida circum
lilia funduntur, strepit omnis murmure campus. (*Aen.* 6.703-9)

Aeneas now saw at the valley's end
A grove standing apart, with stems and boughs
Of woodland rustling, and the stream of Lethe
Running past those peaceful glades. Around it
Souls of a thousand nations filled the air,
As bees in meadows at the height of summer
Hover and home on flowers and thickly swarm
On snow-white lilies, and the countryside
Is loud with humming.

By this reversal and circularity, Shapiro has intricately intertwined the contexts, so that the ancient scene and the modern moment become interchangeable, cycling in an endless loop (Shapiro's bees are compared to Virgil's souls, which link to Virgil's souls compared to Virgil's bees, which then invoke Shapiro's bees, and on it goes), until even priority within the tradition is erased (with Shapiro's bees appearing as the earlier version, which equalizes the authority between the two texts, and draws them both into an eternal present). In addition, Shapiro modifies the original, Virgilian bee passage, to reflect more closely the circumstances of his speaker's perspective, as a man in a painfully failing marriage. Some of the images in Shapiro's version are present in Virgil, too: the 'hovering' and 'swarming' (seemingly inspired by Shapiro's reading of Fitzgerald's translation, quoted above), the 'lavish blossoms', and the bees touching down upon the flowers. However, the slant of the language

in the new lines suggests a more heartrending scene than is actually present in the *Aeneid*: Shapiro's bees are 'drawn to' to the lush marigolds, as if against their rational will, and choose to 'cl[ing] together' on the top of the stalks, desperately trying to stay connected, despite the fact that 'each long stalk' was 'tipping over/ under the pressure' of their joint weight. These modern bees assume the gloomy imprint of the aching husband.

The next lines present a version of Virgil's souls:

even there among the blessed groves, the lush green
of bodiless pleasure, weightless now, unstructured,
free, they swarm to drink oblivion and again put on
the body's weight. (stanza 3, lines 1-4)

This appears to be an impressionistic, compressed interpretation of *Aeneid* 6.703-15. The buoyant, intoxicating quality of these lines describing the souls' longing for rebirth suggests a similar yearning on the part of poet-speaker, himself 'to drink oblivion' like the shades, to escape 'unstructured' and 'weightless' from the burdens of his marriage, into a refreshing realm with 'blessed groves', and 'the lush green/ of bodiless pleasure'. Perhaps he even desires, in some way, to start over, to 'again put on/ the body's weight', and live his life differently in the second instance.

The poem then grounds itself again in the bodies of the modern couple, standing together over the bees:

I leaned down close to look, to see
what you saw, and as I did, unconsciously you rested
one hand on my shoulder, (stanza 3, lines 2-6)

in an old way, dormant for how long? Time, unresting time,
beautiful and perverse, how suddenly it could lift us
clear of our own shade to a luminous attention
it just as suddenly extinguished, as the bees moved on,
the shade, now, darker for that brief respite. (stanza 4, lines 1-5)

The apparition of the bees in the garden (and the consoling memory, in the husband's mind, of its presence in Virgil) has bridged the gulf between these characters, presenting him with an imagined possibility of renewal, which then seems to awaken a remembered gesture in her, of placing her hand on his shoulder. This quiet consolation is the result of their own 'luminous attention' to the moment: by reading the occasion carefully, and with awareness of its long literary context, they are able to reconnect with the human compassion that flows

beneath their union ('I leaned down close to look, to see/ what you saw'). In addition, this 'brief respite' from marital strife ('our own shade') was afforded by 'time, unresting time', in other words, by the wise, timeless guidance of an ancient text, which could 'lift us clear' of troubles into insight. However, the momentary, reassuring analogy between the ancient scene and the modern episode of reconciliation is shattered by the bees' departure, and the world feels colder now without that fleeting impression of ancient solace.

The final turn in the poem decries the pain of human life, whether long past or present:

*Poor souls, Aeneas asks,
how can they crave our daylight so?* (stanza 4, lines 5-6)

This is a near-exact transcription of Robert Fitzgerald's rendering of *Aeneid* 6.721 (*quae lucis miseris tam dira cupido?*): 'The poor souls,/ How can they crave our daylight so?'⁹⁶ The obvious precision of this allusion (further emphasized by the italic font) urges the reader to return to Virgil, to find that the quoted question serves as the conclusion to Shapiro's short lyric poem, but in the *Aeneid* introduces a lengthy and colourful answer by Anchises to Aeneas' soulful query. The core of Anchises' explanation (*Aen.* 6.722-51) is that souls wish to be reborn into human life only once their memory of the sins and heartaches of prior lives has been washed clean by time:

has omnis, ubi mille rotam volvere per annos,
Lethaeum ad fluvium deus evocat agmine magno,
scilicet immemores supera ut convexa revisant
rursus, et incipiant in corpora velle reverti. (*Aen.* 6.748-51)

These other souls,
When they have turned Time's wheel a thousand years,
The gods call in a crowd to Lethe stream,
That there unmemoried they may see again
The heavens and wish re-entry into bodies.

As a reflection on the fading marriage of Shapiro's characters, this reasoning disintegrates the fragile solace of the Virgilian intertext even further: not only does marital renewal require a precious, precarious attentiveness (the confluence of bees in the garden, a memory of Virgil, and a rare moment spent together), which is too easily shattered by shifts in the material

⁹⁶ Fitzgerald (1981).

world (the bees' departure), but it is also at risk on an existential plane: the soul will forget, the ills of this marriage will be worn away after death, and the heartache will therefore be repeated in vain in the fresh start of rebirth. This final image (accessed through Virgil) solidifies the hopelessly cyclical logic of this poem, and its insight into personal anguish.

Shapiro has written about the deficient solace of Greek tragedy:

What tragedy can do, perhaps better than any other form of art, is to face up to the sheer, senseless awfulness of the world without pretending that the art itself makes anything better. If it exalts or affirms the human spirit, it does so by saying that we know what we're up against and we can still live fully in the light of such knowledge. For all the monumental, totalizing claims made on their behalf, the best tragedies recognize the insufficiency of art even as they bring art to the highest level.⁹⁷

It strikes me that the poet has achieved here a similar feat for lyric poetry, galvanised by the epic intertext.

In his essential account of the phenomenon of twentieth-century undergraduate translation survey courses in the United States, Gilbert Allardyce concluded: 'The Western Civ[ilization] course was a characteristically American invention', above all in its explicit 'concern with common experiences underlying national differences' (unlike in modern Europe, where academic history and literature tended to focus on 'separate national strands'),⁹⁸ or indeed separations in historical period. The impression of Homer and Virgil as sources of timeless insight into the experiences of contemporary readers was fostered in a generation of modern American poets, I have proposed, by their college-level exposure to classical epic in translation, taught in a humanist environment. These 'great books' courses thereby shaped an expansive and memorable category of lyric receptions, short poems interweaving ancient and modern scenes in a search for personal understanding (such as these by Hecht, Graham, and Shapiro, described in this chapter). Perhaps more importantly, the American survey course, by its proliferation and accessibility, restored the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* to a prominent place in the cultural imagination of the century, laying the foundation for the other modes of reception explored in the remaining chapters of this thesis. To reiterate

⁹⁷ Shapiro (2004), 30.

⁹⁸ Allardyce (1982), 699.

the words of D.S. Carne-Ross: ‘The American literary man who has developed the interests first awakened by a good Humanities or Classical Civilization course knows that without the languages he can’t do justice to the ancient authors, but he knows too that he can’t ignore them. They are on his map’.⁹⁹ The other diverse and significant effects of this heightened awareness of Homer and Virgil in modern America are explicated in the pages that follow.

⁹⁹ Carne-Ross in Auden et al. (1964), 29.

2. Epic Communion: Recalling the Universal Self in Homeric Archetypes

Fascination with the unique, individual self is a widely recognised quality of American poetry, which dates back to the first emergence of literature in the new nation. Although this preoccupation has origins in a number of European intellectual movements influential in early America (Puritanism, Romanticism, the Enlightenment), it can perhaps be traced most succinctly to the transformational effect of sudden democracy on the excited imagination of people faced with a vast, new frontier and the freedom to determine its future shape. In his famous observational study *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), Alexis de Tocqueville predicted the dramatic impact that the American revolution would have on the outlook of its citizens and poets:

Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it. [Now people] owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.¹

In an excellent chapter on the historical backgrounds of American poetic practice, Richard Gray likewise located the clear roots of American individualism in revolutionary politics:

It was and is the initial assumption in American ideology, the country's image of itself, that the American was someone who had opted out of society in all but its most elemental and inescapable forms. [...] He had [...] rejected those institutions, the products of history, which at once burdened the European and gave him a reassuring sense of purpose and identity. And he had discovered or devised a neutral territory, where his principal task became the invention of himself.²

This duty was undertaken with energy and seriousness by the first major American poets, including Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson; and it remained a central question for many poets of the twentieth century as well, often resulting in expansive, uplifting, confident and distinctive work (for example, the poems discussed in the previous

¹ Tocqueville (1840), Vol. II, Section 2, Chapter 2. Partially quoted in Gray (1990), 5.

² Gray (1990), 5-6.

chapter on American undergraduate translation courses, in which poets seek personal definition through comparison with epic examples).

The downside to this single-minded focus on the perspectives, fears, doubts, goals and triumphs of the lone individual is also depicted in American poetry of the self, and comprises a gradually encroaching and potentially incapacitating sense of loneliness, separation, social and even cosmic isolation. The early modernist master Robert Frost knew well the conflicted nature of intensive individualism. In ‘Acquainted with the Night’, a poem from his middle volume *West-Running Brook* (1928),³ Frost dramatises the disquiet of being confined in a separate life, charged with making sense of it unaided:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye; (stanzas 1-4)

His state of disconnection is haunted by the shadows of other impossible possibilities: sharing his thoughts with the policeman, or having someone waiting at home to ‘call [him] back or say good-bye’, holding out an alternative to his solitary walk, beyond the companion warmth of even ‘the furthest city light’. Although the world around him is populated with figures and voices, he cannot reach them (‘dropped my eyes’, ‘far away [...] from another street’). Frost writes furthermore of the unsettling emptiness of even his internal life, in the poem ‘Desert Places’,⁴ set at night in a snowy field:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places’ (stanza 4),

those isolated interior landscapes lacking sustenance or respite, which cause an involuntary shudder in private moments. American poetic individualism, then, can connote either

³ Frost (1928).

⁴ Frost (1936).

‘solitude or isolation, self-reliance or egotism, freedom or loneliness, self-sufficiency or pride’,⁵ and often both at once, in a problematic, unresolved tension. Gerald Else captured this complex dynamic in a mid-century essay: ‘The twentieth-century man [...] has cut loose from the bonds of society, political traditions, religion, old ways of thinking and feeling, to a degree that was unthinkable and impossible in any previous time. [...] He] is alone to a frightening degree, an atomic individual vis-à-vis society, historical tradition, and nature. His aloneness is his freedom’.⁶

This chapter explores poems that attempt to overcome or counterbalance the negative consequences of ‘aloneness’, that seek to transcend the potentially isolating, egotistic, lonely and prideful effects of individualism, and find or create in poetry an inclusive, communal, connected and self-sacrificing version of identity, a universal self that links all individuals in a common experience of existence beyond limiting personal immediacy. Alan Williams calls this ‘escape’ from an insufficient self in contemporary poetry, ‘plunging into a fertile collective unconscious’.⁷ One potent entry-point into this place of sustaining communion between self and the infinite for twentieth-century American poets is, I will argue, epic text as a source of myth. Stirred by emerging psychoanalytical theories about dreams, mythical archetypes and the collective unconscious, Louise Glück (1943-) and Robert Duncan (1918-1988) in particular, both poet-critics in the High Modernist tradition, invoke and reach beyond archetypal figures from myth as revealed in the *Iliad*, in haunting, oracular poetic explorations, in order to find consolation for the fragile, separate individual in an eternal, boundless unity of human identity.

⁵ Gray (1990), 5.

⁶ Else (1956), 4.

⁷ Williams (1984), 96.

This poetic focus on the consoling universal resonance underlying a discrete personality seems likely to have been inspired and shaped by a prominent cultural development in twentieth-century America: the rise of psychoanalysis, and the popularisation of its theories and themes in the media, concepts which swiftly burgeoned in the popular imagination, and greatly expanded the common conception of the individual self, and its relation to other selves at present and throughout history. The terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are generally ‘used to name the deep and essential unity observable in an individual’s personality and behavior’.⁸ (The ‘universal self’, therefore, denotes the apparent deep, essential unity of collective consciousness.) That this totality is wholly accessible to perception was a long-standing philosophical commonplace, interrupted only at the turn of the century. As Julia Rivkin and Michael Ryan describe: ‘A picture of the human mind as a unified whole that can achieve full awareness of itself has been central to western thought since the seventeenth century. The “cogito” or thinking self defines our humanity and our civility, our difference from animals chained to blind nature and uncontrollable instincts. In the early part of the twentieth century, the assurance of that self-description was disturbed’ by the advent of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).⁹ Basing his conclusions on first-hand, clinical observations rather than exacting, experimental studies (he was certainly an ‘intuitive thinker’ rather than a scientist, as his critics emphasise),¹⁰ Freud developed a therapeutic practice of conversation (‘the talking cure’),¹¹ which purported to eliminate the symptoms of ‘neurotic’ patients by enabling them to recall and face the traumatic experiences and desires that their minds had subconsciously suppressed, and which were finding outlets through undesirable and seemingly unrelated behaviours. According to Freud, simply naming the true pain or disavowed wish was usually enough to defuse it, often instantaneously and permanently:

⁸ Stone (1976), 317.

⁹ Rivkin & Ryan (2004), 389.

¹⁰ Horton & Edwards (1974), 356.

¹¹ Sherwin (2011), 19. The phrase originated in a paper by Freud and his associate J. Breuer, (1895) ‘Fraulein Anna O.’ *Studies on Hysteria*, J. Strachey (trans.) and A. Richards (ed.) London: Penguin, Vol. III, 83. Cited in Emig (1995), 175.

‘There is hardly anything like this in medicine, though in fairy tales you hear of evil spirits whose power is broken as soon as you can tell them their name – the name which they have kept secret’.¹² This transformative relief from discomfort by experiencing it in a controlled setting is also related, as Freud was aware, to ‘the Greek concept of catharsis, which Aristotle used in his *Poetics* to describe the psychological reaction of the audience to tragic performances’, whereby fear and pity felt for the characters on stage productively purge the viewer of those disagreeable emotions in life.¹³

The most important conceptual proposal of the psychoanalytic movement was the split between conscious and unconscious awareness, the division of the human mind into knowable portions, and unplumbed depths.¹⁴ Rivkin and Ryan outline this theory:

The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) [...] described a discovery [...] that the human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams or neurotic symptoms. [...] That primary process of life is entirely irrational, and it cannot distinguish images and things, reasonable objects and unreasonable or socially unacceptable ones. It is the secondary processes of the mind, lodged in the ego and superego or conscience, that bring reason, order, logic, and social acceptability to the otherwise uncontrolled and potentially harmful realm of the biological drives.¹⁵

Lionel Trilling, a ‘leading literary champion of Freud’, called these newly excavated depths the ‘night side’ of man, ‘a kind of hell within him from which rise everlastingly the impulses which threaten his civilization’.¹⁶ These ideas were first presented in the United States by Freud himself, in a series of lectures at Clark University in 1909, and although his published works sold relatively poorly during this initial period,¹⁷ his ‘progress as a celebrity was rapid’.¹⁸ Newspapers and magazines repeated and debated his theories with inexhaustible interest, in stances ranging from shock and hesitation, to exaggerated drama, to near-religious veneration. The amateur practice of psychoanalysis (‘the determination of symptoms, dreams,

¹² From an address by Freud titled ‘The Future Prospects of Psychoanalytic Therapy’ (1910), quoted in Hale (1971), 401.

¹³ Stok (2010), 363. Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b.

¹⁴ Although Freud’s ‘discovery’ of the unconscious and its primal drives was hailed as revolutionary in its time, and exerted an out-sized influence on the twentieth-century American imagination, it had antecedents in prior philosophical work. Lloyd-Jones (1985) points out that many of Freud’s ideas were ‘anticipated’ by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer (152); and Stok (2010) offers a concise history of psychological knowledge from ancient to modern times (355-61).

¹⁵ Rivkin & Ryan (2004), 389-91. See Horton & Edwards (1974), 345-9, for a detailed discussion of Freud’s ego/superego/id (conscious/conscience/unconscious) formulation.

¹⁶ Trilling (1950), 40-1, described and quoted by Ross (2012), 168.

¹⁷ See Hale (1971), 430, on the incredibly scant first-hand popularity of Freud’s work.

¹⁸ Hale (1971), 397.

accidents, and parapraxes [‘Freudian slips’])¹⁹ became a popular ‘parlor game’,²⁰ and the possibility that repressed, deviant sexuality existed beneath the composed surface of every person of one’s acquaintance ‘provided the most exciting topic of conversation ever to titillate the American public’.²¹

World War I seemed to confirm the veracity of Freud’s claims with vivid horror (human beings really ‘must’ have a dark, primitive capacity in order to enact such senseless violence),²² and World War II left an unprecedented number of soldiers traumatised and plagued by the very neurotic symptoms that Freud’s therapy uniquely proposed to alleviate.²³ These circumstances prompted a second wave of growth for psychoanalysis in post-war America, leading to its height of both ‘popularization and prestige’ in the late-forties and fifties, when ‘Freudian ideas [were] omnipresent in the culture’.²⁴ The practice was increasingly respected and accepted in the field of medical psychiatry, and the media response continued to flourish. Around 1950, there was a publishing boom of translations and secondary accounts of Freud’s work, including a new trend in popular non-fiction, of ‘couch stories’, in which celebrities described the intimate revelations and self-discoveries achieved in their journey of psychoanalysis.²⁵ Interest in Freudian and related psychologies²⁶ ebbed

¹⁹ Hale (1971), 411.

²⁰ Hoffman (1957), vii.

²¹ Horton & Edwards (1974), 359. Hoffman (1971) quoted a 1922 editorial from the *New York Times*: ‘The “crime of the Freudians” was that they discussed “subjects which polite people do not discuss in mixed companies, or at all if they are particularly sensitive”’ (25 Sept 1922, 14-15) (67).

²² Hale (1971) quoted contemporaneous psychologist J. Jastrow, who wrote in 1917 ‘that the “baser side of living assumed in Freudian psychology” was reflected in the “horrors of murder, rapine and pillage...perpetrated daily by persons who a few years ago were at home a body of tender-minded citizens”’ (430). Originally from (3 May 1917) ‘The Psychoanalyzed Self’ *Dial* 62, 397.

²³ Hale (1995), 187. On general doubts about the efficacy of therapy, see Herman (1995), 555-6.

²⁴ Burnham (2012), 4.

²⁵ Hale (1995), 277.

²⁶ Makari (2010) describes colourfully the common use of ‘Freud’ to stand for a number of related propositions and lineages in the study of psychology (including the work of Carl Jung, neo-Freudian Jacques Lacan, and ‘object relations’ theorists like Ronald Fairbairn and Melanie Klein, which likewise disseminated through American channels in the past century): ‘All the while, as psychoanalysts fanned out, wittingly or unwittingly, they brought with them the culture of Kant; the assumptions of *Geisteswissenschaft* and a European classical education; they brought evolutionary biology, positivism, and Newtonian physics along with the thought of Ribot, Charcot, Bernheim, Breuer, Brentano, Krafft-Ebing, Fliess, Brücke, Helmholtz, Mach, Schelling, Fechner, Hering, Haeckel, Ehrenfels, Forel, Bleuler, Jung, Gross, Adler, Stekel, Sadger, Rank, Ferenczi, Abraham, Horney, Alexander, Fenichel, and many more. However, most of these ancestors would be increasingly diminished, forgotten, or dismissed. Instead, a ghostly presence would carry all that had been inherited and destroyed, all the possibility and all the loss [, ...] a word, a name, a talisman: Freud. A man had come to represent a

significantly during the radical social movements of the 1960s, and was increasingly replaced by a ‘new somaticism’ (focus on the body, rather than the psyche), and ‘new psychopharmaceutical resources for mental illnesses’.²⁷ Psychoanalysis never recovered its prominence after those years of decline, and is now simply ‘one of the many modalities of psychotherapy’.²⁸ However, in mid-century America, “‘psychiatric cant’ was in the air’ (in the words of Jean Stafford, the novelist and first wife of Robert Lowell),²⁹ and would have been absorbed by American poets, to a greater or lesser extent, simply by cultural osmosis.

The historical reasons for Freud’s spectacular traction in the twentieth century American imagination are numerous, and concurrent.³⁰ The most interesting in the context of this chapter is an inherent appeal of psychology to the individualist spirit. George Makari calls the movement ‘the richest systematic description of inner experience that the Western world had produced’,³¹ and in a nation fundamentally concerned with personal selfhood and definition, it was a natural compass. In addition, for writers and artists grappling with the restrictions of solitary consciousness, the interpretive approach offered a route of exploration into that feeling of entrapment, and a possible recourse in a transpersonal realm of experience, the collective unconscious.

In his definitive study of Freud in America, Nathan G. Hale observed: ‘The boldness of the analytic vision, the intimacy and immediacy of its concerns – sex, family, relationships, dreams, mistakes, hatred and love, lust and murder, even boredom – remain unparalleled except, as Freud well knew, in great literature. The literary qualities of psychoanalysis

history, and as a symbol he would live on, haunting his sons and daughters, his enemies and friends’ (485).

²⁷ Burnham (2012), 6.

²⁸ Hale (1995), 392.

²⁹ Quoted in Manousos (1984), 17.

³⁰ Ross (2012) proposes, in particular, that Freud’s rise in the U.S. ‘owed a great deal to the simultaneous turn of American culture toward modernism’, with its similar interest in ‘subjectivity and the determinations of the self’ (188, 165). She cites as ‘the classic account of Freud as modernist’, C.E. Schorske (1980) *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. For full bibliography, and further argument, see the chapter (Ross (2012)). On the irony that the pessimist Freud’s greatest success was in an idealistic country for which he felt strong contempt, see Falzeder (2012), 89-109. On the reciprocal influence of America on Freudian ideas, especially ‘the move toward ego-psychology’, see Wolin (1995), 250-1.

³¹ Makari (2010), 483.

guaranteed its appeal to intellectuals'.³² Unsurprisingly, the effects of psychoanalysis on literary production and criticism were immediate (begun, in fact, by Freud himself),³³ and included the increased treatment in scholarship and literature of prominent Freudian themes and questions (sex, family dynamics, the irrational),³⁴ writing styles inspired by the 'free association' technique encouraged in analysis,³⁵ and the search by critics for the unconscious element in literary characters, authors and texts.³⁶ Above all, psychoanalysis reinvigorated and transformed the study of ancient myth, which in turn created noticeable trends among new compositions, including the poems discussed in this chapter.

For most of its history, 'myth' was understood as traditional narratives, passed down over time, depicting vivid though not necessarily historical events from the past, and perhaps containing general morals or messages underlying the specific details of the story. Fritz Graf wrote of this process: 'Myths are transmitted from one generation to another, without anyone knowing who created them: this is what is meant by traditional. [...] The origins of the tale are so far removed in time and space as to be irretrievable'.³⁷ Freud, and his disciple and successor Carl Jung (1875-1961), who broke off from psychoanalysis in 1911 to found his own practice of 'analytical psychology', interpreted classical myths in a deeper, more mystical capacity, as symbols for unconscious patterns, repeated throughout history, among innumerable civilizations and individuals. According to this view,

myths and dreams often work in the same way, and [...] the mind functions in both by means of the so-called primary processes of condensation, displacement and symbolization, disregarding the categories of space and time and relieving tension by means of wish-fulfilling illusions. Freud was the inventor of the notion, later even more strongly insisted on by Karl

³² Hale (1995), 380.

³³ Rivkin & Ryan (2004) note: 'Psychoanalytic literary criticism begins with Freud himself, whose "The Uncanny", in part a reading of Hoffman's horror story "The Sandman", can be said to inaugurate the critical genre' (394).

³⁴ For the most influential example, see Dodds (1951).

³⁵ As originally described by Freud in (1924) 'Further Recommendations in the Technique of Psychoanalysis' *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, London: Hogarth Press, Vol. II: 355-56, cited in Hoffman (1957).

³⁶ Interesting examples, reading famous literature as dreams (with revealing gaps, conflations, substitutions and symbolisations), include Bloom (1973) and Oliensis (2009). Freud himself used classical material as analogies and organising principles for his ideas, on which see e.g. Armstrong (2005), Bowlby (2007) and Staley (2013).

³⁷ Graf (1993), 2-3.

Abraham and later still by Jung, that myths are a product of the collective unconscious, and can be regarded as ‘the dream-thinking of the people’.³⁸

In Jung’s formulation, myths are ‘archetypes’, ‘forms of images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin’.³⁹ Gilbert Highet, a British professor at Columbia, who wrote in 1949 of the then-emerging theory, explained that myths allow human beings to

relieve the tension of [forbidden] desire by saying that it has already come true [... in] the story. [...] Oedipus, Cinderella, Psyche, Helen of Troy, Don Juan, Aladdin or Gyges, David the slayer of Goliath or Jack-the-giant-killer, Sindbad or Ulysses, Hercules or Samson – all these characters are not so much historical individuals as projections of the wishes, passions, and hopes of all mankind.⁴⁰

Freud even used certain Greek figures explicitly, to signify common psychological disturbances, for instance Narcissus (to stand for self-love and sexual regard), Medusa (for the ‘infantile fear of castration’), Prometheus (‘whose acquisition and control of fire was interpreted as a phallic symbol’), and of course, most famously, Oedipus (‘as a prototype of the sexual desire felt by [male] children for their mothers’).⁴¹

This new association between myth and the collective unconscious became deeply lodged in popular awareness, such that the poet H.D. wrote in her memoir of childhood: ‘Myth is actuality, as we now know’;⁴² and a number of prominent scholars and critics published marked statements about the continuity of human nature across millennia, as revealed in the continuity of myth. Highet concluded his chapter on psychoanalysis by declaring: ‘We opened this discussion by asking why these playwrights chose Greek legends for their subjects. The central answer is that the myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all problems, the problems which do not change, because men and women do not

³⁸ Lloyd-Jones (1985), 162, perhaps referring to *Totem and Taboo* (1912), in which Freud termed myths the ‘distorted wish dreams of entire nations, the dreams of early mankind’ (quoted in Graf (1993), 36).

³⁹ Campbell (1993), 18, quoting Jung (1938) *Psychology and Religion*.

⁴⁰ Highet (1949), 523-4.

⁴¹ Stok (2010), 366.

⁴² Quoted in Murnaghan (2009), 66. Originally from H.D.’s *The Gift* (written 1941-3, published 1960), 84. H.D. undertook psychoanalysis with Freud, in Vienna in 1933.

change'.⁴³ Norman O. Brown wrote that he 'accept[s] the basic Freudian postulate of the existence of unconscious motives in ancient man as well as modern man'.⁴⁴ Joseph Campbell, in a bestselling work of comparative mythology that influenced education and creative arts in the United States for decades after 1949, stated:

Freud, Jung, and their followers have demonstrated irrefutably that the logic, the heroes, and the deeds of myth survive into modern times. In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognized, rudimentary, yet secretly potent pantheon of dreams. The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change.⁴⁵

Niall Rudd (a twentieth-century classicist, though not American) wrote as recently as 1996:

“Classical humanism” [is] the rational study of the Greeks and Romans as fellow human beings. This rests on the assumption that, long before the Mycenaean civilisation was formed, the basic features of human nature had evolved; and that, in spite of the bewildering diversity of beliefs and customs, those features remain the same. In some quarters, of course, this assumption is contested; but its opponents have difficulty in establishing *how* human nature is supposed to have changed – and since when'.⁴⁶ This sense that ancient and modern humans share the same 'essence' is also central to the phenomenon I proposed in Chapter 1, on American education, in which twentieth-century future poets were taught about the universality of human nature in school and college courses on classical literature, and therefore appear to have turned to Homer and Virgil later in their lives, as sources of insight into their personal dilemmas and options for resolution. Perhaps the sense that what is ancient is also contemporary, which so deeply infused the undergraduate translation courses of the past century, was drawn also from Freudian ideas circulating in popular culture at the time.

This changelessness was even implied to have a rejuvenating quality, offering perhaps a source of renewal to a fraught society. Campbell called myth 'the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural

⁴³ Hight (1949), 540.

⁴⁴ Brown (1957), 242.

⁴⁵ Campbell (1993), 4.

⁴⁶ Rudd (2005), 232.

manifestation',⁴⁷ and characterised the modern hero as one who can turn inward ('retreat from the desperations of the waste land to the peace of the everlasting realm that is within'),⁴⁸ and return to the surface with renewed psychic strength, to 'release again the flow of life into the body of the world'.⁴⁹

That modern poetry engaged with these new sensibilities and beliefs was perhaps inevitable. The mid-twentieth century became, in Helen Vendler's phrase, the age of 'the Freudian lyric'. In discussing works by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, James Merrill, Frank Bidart, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, she proposes that 'many of the poets of postwar America found in the therapeutic hour (and its textual support in Freud's writings) not only themes for their poetry but also new formal procedures shaping it',⁵⁰ for instance, following 'the Muse of free association' toward new types of lyric expression.⁵¹ An important example of this innovative turn in lyric poetry is the ostensibly ingenuous admissions of the 'Confessional' school of modern poets.⁵² I consider Confessional poetry to be a branch of poetry that emerged directly out of Freudianism and the newly acute attention to psychological dimensions in life.

Another such branch, I propose, is psychologised, lyric receptions of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*.⁵³ As time-honoured sources of myth, these texts became an obvious, fertile testing ground for the new ideas about analysis and mythical archetype, and I have catalogued over fifty short receptions of Homer and Virgil that explore imagined or perceived psychoanalytical aspects of the epics. These fall into two categories: poems that cast the poet as analyst, describing the case of a troubled epic character (for instance, in my list, Odysseus, Achilles, Briseis, Helen, Philoctetes, Aphrodite, Anchises, Aeneas and Dido) in expository,

⁴⁷ Campbell (1993), 3.

⁴⁸ Campbell (1993), 17.

⁴⁹ Campbell (1993), 40.

⁵⁰ Vendler (1995), 31.

⁵¹ Vendler (1995), 32.

⁵² See the excellent studies Gill (2006) and Sherwin (2011), on the confessional movement.

⁵³ For an early use of this term 'psychologise', in relation to classical reception, see Dodds (1951): 'Yet they [daemons] are objective, since they stand for the objective rule that blood must be atoned; it is only Euripides and Mr. T.S. Eliot who psychologise them as the pangs of conscience' (42), referring to the process of making external events about internal forces.

probing, and open-ended terms;⁵⁴ and poems that speak in the voice of an apparently neurotic character (Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Circe, Elpenor, Achilles, Helen and Aeneas), attempting to clarify his or her personality, turning the poem into the contained therapy session, and casting the reader as analyst, in a way.⁵⁵ Among these receptions, the poems can be further categorised according to Freudian theme: dreams,⁵⁶ disturbed sexuality,⁵⁷ and repression.⁵⁸

Although many of these psychologised receptions are simply straightforward applications of a cultural trend to famous stories, there are a number that stand out for a more unexpected, visionary approach. Versions by Laura (Riding) Jackson, Allen Grossman, Robert Duncan and Louise Glück engage explicitly with the transcendental aspect of Freudian theory, the promise of healing to be found in recovering hidden aspects of the self, and recognising the deep, universal unity that underlies disjointed, individual identity. This implied form of salvation has been identified as a spiritual undercurrent in psychoanalysis,

⁵⁴ Such poems include Laura (Riding) Jackson 'Helen's Burning' (1938); Frederic Prokosch 'Sunburned Ulysses' (1940); Mark Van Doren 'Odysseus' and 'Achilles' (1948); W. S. Merwin 'Odysseus' (1960); Kathleen Spivack 'Mythmaking' (1966); Peter Davison 'Calypso' (1970); Rachel Hadas 'After the Cave' (1975) and 'Philoctetes' (1989); Peter Davison 'On Ithaca' (1981); Louise Glück 'The Triumph of Achilles' (1985), 'Parable of the King' and 'Odysseus' Decision' (1996), 'The Queen of Carthage', 'Roman Study' and 'The Golden Bough' (1999); Doug Anderson 'Spoken by the Sentry at Achilles's Tent' and 'The War' (1994); Alan Shapiro 'Calypso, Penelope' (1996) and 'Aphrodite' (2000); and Rosanna Warren 'Turnus' (2003).

⁵⁵ Examples include Laura (Riding) Jackson 'Helen's Faces' (1938); Horace Gregory 'A Temptation of Odysseus' and 'Haunted Odysseus: Last Testament' (1951); Stanley Kunitz 'Off Point Lotus' (1958); Lysander Kemp 'Odysseus' (1958); John Ciardi 'Ulysses' (1959); Allen Grossman 'Tales of Odysseus' (1965); Robert Duncan 'Achilles' Song' (1968); Richmond Lattimore 'Odysseus', 'Penelope', 'Elpenor' and 'Circe' (comprising 'Notes from the Odyssey') (1968); Maura Stanton 'A Voice for the Sirens' (1975); Donald Revell 'To Penelope' (1986); Allen Grossman 'The Life and Death Kisses' (1991); and Louise Glück 'Penelope's Song', 'Ithaca', 'Telemachus' Detachment', 'Telemachus' Guilt', 'Telemachus' Kindness', 'Telemachus' Dilemma', 'Telemachus' Fantasy', 'Circe's Torment', 'Penelope's Stubbornness', 'Telemachus' Confession' and 'Telemachus' Burden' (1996).

⁵⁶ Dream-poems include Robert Lowell 'Falling Asleep over the Aeneid' (1951); Robert Penn Warren 'Fatal Interview: Penthesilea and Achilles' (1958); Richmond Lattimore 'Notes from the Odyssey' (1968); Peter Davison 'On Ithaca' (1981); Allen Grossman 'The Life and Death Kisses' (1991); and Rachel Hadas 'Philoctetes' (1989). For insightful readings of Lowell's famous, psychologised interpretation of the *Aeneid* ('Falling Asleep', above), see Mazzaro (1965), 74-7, Lind (1980), Manousos (1984), Ziolkowski (1993), Mariani (1994), 160-1, Johnson (2004) and Thomas (2006).

⁵⁷ Poems of sexual deviance include Frederic Prokosch 'Sunburned Ulysses' (1940); Robert Penn Warren 'Fatal Interview: Penthesilea and Achilles' (1958); Kathleen Spivack 'Mythmaking' (1966); Alan Dugan 'At Circe's Place' (1973); Maura Stanton 'A Voice for the Sirens' (1975); Allen Grossman 'After Repetition' (1979), 'Bow Spirit' (1982); and Doug Anderson 'The War' (1994).

⁵⁸ Subtle evidence of repression on the part of the character appears in Charles Norman 'Telemachus' (1930); W.S. Merwin 'Odysseus' (1960); Alan Shapiro 'Calypso, Penelope' (1996); and Rosanna Warren 'Turnus' (2003).

which in a way served a religious function in an anxious American culture increasingly skeptical of traditional religion.⁵⁹ Quoting a mid-century article, Ross highlights this new faith in Freud:

William Barrett in the 1947 *Partisan Review* [... professed:] ‘Modern man has lost the religious sanctions which had once surrounded his life at every moment with a recognizable test capable of telling him whether he was living “in the truth” or not’. Freud had shown that the problem was psychological, that we are ‘creatures of...divided and self-alienated consciousness’. Only Freud can tell us ‘how we are to live truthfully’, Barrett asserted, ‘how authenticity is to be achieved either in art or life’.⁶⁰

Hale wrote of this particular application of therapy in a fragmented modern society:

‘Psychoanalysis has fostered the cure of souls in a scientific age’ that would ‘otherwise remain cold and comfortless’.⁶¹ Following from this possibility of redemption in Freudian self-knowledge, these distinctive, depth-seeking psychological receptions of myth from Homer and Virgil aspire to be ‘portals’, to use Grossman’s image,⁶² recalling poet and reader alike to a more original, complete, inviolable identity, beyond the transient, human self, and accessible through mythical archetypes. The act of remembering, seeing and touching this place of timeless collective consciousness in poetry, becomes a cathartic recourse in an individual life, a return from confusion, pain and fragmentation, to clarity, relief and communion in the undivided, universal origin of experience.

⁵⁹ On the twentieth-century interchange between Christianity and modern psychology, see the major study Rieff (1966).

⁶⁰ Ross (2012), 168, quoting William Barrett (1947) ‘Writers and Madness’ *Partisan Review* 14, 7.

⁶¹ Hale (1995), 382.

⁶² Grossman (1992), 17.

Robert Duncan: Release and Reunion

Robert Duncan was a poet of process,⁶³ who composed in a spontaneous, unrevised, open-verse style that attempted to tap into a vast plane of consciousness beyond his personal limits, and record what he heard or found there. He was concerned with the whole of reality, ‘both what is visible and what informs that visibility’.⁶⁴ His aim was ‘not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know’,⁶⁵ continually emerging from the edges of awareness, and moving into view for consideration. This belief in meaning hidden in the margins of the world is contextualised usefully by Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman:

Part of [the] normality [in modernity] is a given world without depth, what some have called a disenchanted world, referring to the Enlightenment’s legacy of equating the ‘real’ with the material and the commensurable, a world restricted to measurable quantities, [beyond which] lay all that is outside the ‘normal’: the worlds of hidden fact, hidden history, hidden mind, hidden body, as if all of us live on the edge of an occult reality that is really quite ordinary. Duncan’s reading of Freud located Freud’s unconscious as just such an occult reality,⁶⁶

and his work was a lifelong foray into these mysterious reaches of existence.

Counted among the Black Mountain poets (who included also Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov, among others, and who were conscious heirs of ‘Modernist experimentation’),⁶⁷ Robert Duncan arguably evolved his fluid, responsive and impersonal poetics from exposure to Olson’s idiosyncratic program of ‘COMPOSITION BY FIELD’, according to which

the page was a field on which the poem was composed, and that linguistic field arose from and remained in dynamic interaction with the entire field of the poet’s experience. [...] The

⁶³ Robert Duncan (1919-1988) was a postwar modernist poet, in the tradition of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and H.D., who spent his life and career in San Francisco. Adopted by parents devoutly committed to esoteric religion and the occult, Duncan grew up with an awareness of the deeper questions and hidden aspects of life. He declared his vocation as a poet in his teens, and studied briefly at Berkeley and Black Mountain College. In 1941 he avoided the draft by coming out as homosexual, one of the earliest literary figures to announce this publicly. Over six decades, the poet published more than forty volumes of poetry, as well as essays and plays (including a version of the *Medea* in 1965). He was an influence for the Beat poets and in the San Francisco renaissance, and worked closely with H.D. late in her life. For more details about Duncan’s experiences, see Duncan (1971) and Bertholf & Gelpi (2004).

⁶⁴ Boughn & Coleman (2011), 7.

⁶⁵ Duncan (1985a), 87. As Duncan asked in his essay ‘Pages from a Notebook’, ‘Why should one’s art then be an achievement? Why not, more an adventure?’ (Duncan (1995), 14, quoted in Johnston, (2006), 32).

⁶⁶ Boughn & Coleman (2011), 4.

⁶⁷ Bertholf & Gelpi (2004), x.

poem – far from being ‘autotelic’, to use Eliot’s word for the Modernist ideal of the self-contained art-object disjunct from inchoate experience – emerged in and through the engagement with the whole field of experience: material and psychological and verbal.⁶⁸

This ‘whole field of experience’ has two referents, both the life of the specific poet, and human knowledge in general. The poet, then, becomes ‘like a prism which refracts the light passing through it’,⁶⁹ and the poem occurs at a crossing between ‘infinite’ and ‘individual’ awareness.⁷⁰

Duncan extended this compositional practice to erase or go beyond the personality of the poet as much as possible, such that infinite experience, in the form of other voices, images and ideas, past and future, could flow through him and across the field of his poems in the present, unedited by personal ego or desires. His intensive method involved steeping himself in materials related to an envisioned piece, and then clearing his mind and desk to write the poem, in whatever way it emerged. The results are quite fascinating: dreamlike, haunting, drifting verses, often polyvocal and allusive, with sudden surprising jumps in logic (where a new thought was noted down the instant it arose, without censure or conjunction), as well as an open and scattered appearance on the page (with words seemingly ‘strewn haphazardly’, but ‘actually [...] painstakingly noted’, to ‘indicate soundings for the poem as Duncan hears and records it’, almost like a musical score with notes and rests).⁷¹ Although the poet did not publish everything that he wrote by this method (and thus did edit his corpus, to an extent), he did resist the urge to second-guess his individual pieces, once they had occurred: ‘Often I must force myself to remain responsible to the error that sticks in pride’s craw, not to erase it, but to bring it forward, to work with it, even if this flaw a hoped-for success’,⁷² that is, even if

⁶⁸ Bertholf & Gelpi (2004), xi.

⁶⁹ A phrase used by Cooley (1980), 61, to describe Duncan’s ‘imprint’ on his seemingly impersonal verses.

⁷⁰ Bertholf & Gelpi (2004), xii. Olson’s approach bears similarities to Seamus Heaney’s more recent charge for poetry, that it ‘has to be a model of active consciousness. [...] It must contain within itself the coordinates of the reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. When it does contain these coordinates, it becomes a power to which we can have recourse; it functions as the rim of the silence out of which consciousness arises and into which it must descend’ (Heaney (1990), 11). Duncan (1985) summarizes the back-and-forth duality of this mechanism: ‘Our consciousness, and the poem as a supreme effort of consciousness, comes in a dancing organization between personal and cosmic identity’ (78).

⁷¹ Cooley (1980), 56.

⁷² Duncan (1985b).

the poem takes on its own momentum and motive, separate from the poet's hopes.⁷³ The poems that made it into print, therefore, are true organic records of an artist's moments of attempted communion with a wider consciousness.

Duncan was fully engaged in conceptualising, and finding ways to go deeper into, that plane of awareness that appears to transcend the individual self. One of his favoured models for collective consciousness is the dream, inspired by his serious reading of Freud.⁷⁴ He wrote in a chapter from his exploratory meditation about poetics, and his mentor, *The H.D. Book*: 'It is the ground art makes for the experience and the dream to become communal that I most value. Our own dreams, like our own lives, are fleeting and insubstantial, unless they are delivered over from the personal into the commons of man's dream', a deliverance that Duncan sought tirelessly to achieve in his art.⁷⁵ That this shared space was deeply valuable and worth exploring was encouraged by his storytelling family, who 'regarded myth as [...] speaking from the realm of lost or hidden truth'.⁷⁶

As Duncan came to believe, recovering this 'lost or hidden truth' is the utmost goal of poetry, by which the poet and reader alike have a chance to attain a feeling of homecoming, re-union, the relief and consolation of being reunited with the wholeness of existence, and released from the fragmentation of individual identity.⁷⁷ Duncan reflected in his essay 'Towards an Open Universe': 'The most real, the truth, the beauty of the poem is a configuration, but also a happening in language, that leads back into or on towards the beauty of the universe itself. I am but part of the whole of what I am, and wherever I seek to

⁷³ Duncan wrote of myth, which he connected closely with poetry: 'This is not a story of what [the teller] thinks or wishes life to be, it is the story that *comes to him* and forces his telling' (Duncan (1985b), 1).

⁷⁴ Duncan's close friend and fellow poet Denise Levertov spoke of 'Robert', '(deeply influenced as he was by Freud)' (Levertov (1979), 96, quoted in Tallman (2006), 68). Duncan himself acknowledged his interest and his debt, in Duncan (1971); Duncan (1985b), 6-7; Duncan (1985c), 231; and Duncan (1995) 'Pages from a Notebook'. He wrote also of Jung, who in his view simply reiterated Freud's vital theories, especially 'this idea of oneself related to a true self, where *the* "Self" with a capital *S* can appear (Duncan (1985c), 229).

⁷⁵ Duncan (2011), 310.

⁷⁶ Duncan (1985b), 8.

⁷⁷ On the equal share of the reader in this possibility, see Duncan (2011): 'The poet and the reader, who if he is intent in reading becomes a new poet of the poem, come to write or to read in order to participate through the work in a consciousness that moves freely in time and space' (199, quoted in Boughn & Coleman (2011), 12-13).

understand I fail what I know' already, on a deeper, more intuitive, more elemental level.⁷⁸

For Duncan, 'we [poets] work toward the Truth of things', and seek 'to commune with creation, with the divine world' within and underlying the visible world.⁷⁹ This is possible only by letting go, both of limiting, personal inclinations in the moment of composition, and also of the ambitions of ego in a career or life as a whole. The poet wrote of his own release from self: 'Beyond my individual comprehension, in my poetics I let go of striving to claim some authenticity for the poem in itself and give its authority over into a universal authenticity that arises from the store of human experience acknowledged in the language'.⁸⁰ This counterintuitive promise, of letting go of something slight, to gain something vast, is expressed in a stream-of-consciousness passage from his essay 'The Self in Postmodern

Poetry':

The Self, with a capital S, this Atman, Breath, Brahma, that moves in the word to sound [,] I so love [that] I also would undo the idea of [it], let it go. [...] Something more than Death or Inertia comes as a lure in this 'Letting go'. Here again it comes into the poem as it appeared as a command in dream: 'Let it go. Let it go. Grief's its proper mode'. This whole grand idea of Self – a sublime Undoing.⁸¹

This implies that the 'Undoing' of the discrete, small self required to glimpse the composite, universal 'Self' is not dangerous or undesirable ('Something more than Death or Inertia'), but rather 'sublime', and itself beyond language ('I also would undo the idea of [it]'), no matter how many words approximate its wonder ('The Self, [...] Atman, Breath, Brahma').

Robert Duncan's poem 'Achilles' Song' (1968),⁸² a two-page lyric work in loose stanzas of varying length, is a beautiful example of the poet's movement toward the universal, by way of releasing the personal. It also exemplifies his occasional use of epic archetypes to undertake this passage.⁸³ In the poem, Duncan steps into the perspective of Achilles, and as

⁷⁸ Duncan (1985), 79. On a poem as 'a happening', cf. Martindale's analogy of a musical performance for reading a text, in which he asks, 'Is a poem [...] better thought of as *an event (in time)* than as a thing?' (Martindale (1993), 17).

⁷⁹ Duncan (1985a), 78.

⁸⁰ Duncan (1985b), 38.

⁸¹ Duncan (1985c), 233-4.

⁸² Duncan (1968).

⁸³ The other short receptions of Homeric epic among Duncan's poetry are 'At the Loom' (1968), and a lyric sequence titled 'Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn's Moly' (1984), which includes 'Preface to the Suite', and 'The Moly Suite' (comprising 'Near Circe's House', 'Rites of Passage: I', 'Moly', and 'Rites of Passage II').

the hero quotes the remembered voice of his mother Thetis, promising liberation from the pain of life. Achilles is also a major figure in H.D.'s lengthy revision of Homer, *Helen in Egypt*. Duncan highlights the symbolic possibilities of the character:

In *Helen in Egypt*, Achilles had his autonomy as a hero. Like Helen, he too is a collective or immortal person. Not only has the image, the Imago of the Achilles or the Helen, been fed by the imaginations of thousands who are participants – writers, readers, and before them singers, listeners – in the poetry or making, but in turn these fairies of the human dream [...] have been fed by actual men and women – models, actors, and impersonators. So here, too, there is a holocaust of war-dead who have contributed to the reality of Achilles, a constellation of women who have gone up into the Helen.⁸⁴

This describes in particular the protagonists of H.D.'s version; but the concept clearly underpinned his plan for his own 'Achilles' Song', as well.

The poem begins with the hero's voice, emerging like the sound of waves from the silence:

I do not know more than the Sea tells me,
told me long ago, or I overheard Her
telling distant roar upon the sands,
waves of meaning in the cradle of whose
sounding and resounding power I
slept. (stanza 1)

'The Sea' seems to have a double meaning here, both 'Her', that is, Thetis, the sea nymph who is Achilles' mother, but also the primordial sea of energy and possibility, 'in the cradle of whose/ sounding and resounding power I/ slept' before birth, and from which individual minds and lives emerge, as 'waves of meaning'. In his essay about the self, Duncan wrote of this emergence as an individual entity:

In the early statements that haunt language for me – 'I hurt myself', 'I was not myself', 'I was beside myself', 'I was there myself' – [...] the process of demarcation of utter individuality from the universe I was part of began, a language of boundaries, of 'here' and 'there', 'now' and 'not-now'. [...] We had as babies withdrawn our selves from the boundless presence we were lost in.⁸⁵

That Thetis and Achilles are resonant symbols of this arising, and its inverse, the potential for return to the original boundlessness, is clear from the first appearance of mother to son in the

⁸⁴ Duncan (2011), 640.

⁸⁵ Duncan (1985c), 230-1.

Iliad. Here I quote Richmond Lattimore's translation from 1951, which would have been available to Duncan at the time of writing:⁸⁶

Ὡς φάτο δάκρυ χέων, τοῦ δ' ἔκλυε πότνια μήτηρ
ἡμένη ἐν βένθεσσι ἀλὸς παρὰ πατρὶ γέροντι·
καρπαλίμως δ' ἀνέδνυ πολυῆς ἀλὸς ἤϊτ' ὀμίχλη,
καὶ ῥα πάροιθ' αὐτοῖο καθέζετο δάκρυ χέοντος,
χειρὶ τέ μιν κατέρεξεν ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζε·
τέκνον τί κλαίεις; τί δέ σε φρένας ἴκετο πένθος;
ἔξαύδα, μὴ κεῖθε νόῳ, ἵνα εἶδομεν ἄμφω. (1.357-63)

So he spoke in tears and the lady his mother heard him
as she sat in the depths of the sea at the side of her aged father,
and lightly she emerged like a mist from the grey water.
She came and sat beside him as he wept, and stroked him
with her hand and called him by name and spoke to him: 'Why then,
child, do you lament? What sorrow has come to your heart now?
Tell me, do not hide it in your mind, and thus we shall both know.'

The goddess literally 'emerged like a mist from the grey water', at once part of a larger body (mist and water are related in essence), and also newly separate from it, taking an individual form. In addition, she entreats her son to open up to her: 'Do not hide it in your mind, and thus we shall both know', which replicates Duncan's practice of dissolving the boundaries of his individual personality, to allow other minds and voices to penetrate his own, mingling together in a version of shared consciousness.

That Duncan may have been familiar with the Greek passage is tentatively suggested by the next stanza:

Manchild, She sang

– or was it a storm uplifting the night
into a moving wall in which
I was carried as if a mothering nest had
been made in dread?

the wave of a life darker than my
life before me sped, and I,
larger than I was, grown dark as
the shoreless depth,
arose from myself, shaking the last
light of the sun
from me. (stanzas 2-4)

'Manchild' could be an eccentric or pointed translation of the Greek word τέκνον (1.362, above, meaning son or male offspring, which other translators render simply as 'child').⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Lattimore (1951). Poetic versions by Robert Fitzgerald (1974) and Robert Fagles (1990) had not yet been published.

Duncan's reading of the word, which questions Achilles' maturity, uses a shift in tone to mark off these stanzas, which introduce the darker side of Achilles' history and character. The hero reveals himself here to be swollen with pride ('larger than I was', and 'dark as/ the shoreless depth', that is, equal to infinite reality), and a bit sinister ('shaking the last/ light of the sun/ from me', with nothing mild remaining). These lines also refer to the piteousness of Achilles' fate, his mother conflated with 'a storm', who 'carried' her son 'as if a mothering nest had/ been made in dread'. This image again recalls *Iliad* 1, in which Thetis rues Achilles' lot in life:

ὦ μοι τέκνον ἐμόν, τί νύ σ' ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα;
 αἶθ' ὄφελες παρὰ νηυσὶν ἀδάκρυτος καὶ ἀπήμων
 ἦσθαι, ἐπεὶ νύ τοι αἴσα μίνυθ' ἀπερὸς οὐ τι μάλα δῆν·
 νῦν δ' ἅμα τ' ὠκύμορος καὶ οἴζυρος περὶ πάντων
 ἔπλεο· τὼ σε κακῇ αἴσῃ τέκον ἐν μεγάροισι. (1. 413-18)

'Ah me,
 my child. Your birth was bitterness. Why did I raise you?
 If only you could sit by your ships untroubled, not weeping,
 since indeed your lifetime is to be short, of no length.
 Now it has befallen that your life must be brief and bitter
 beyond all men's. To a bad destiny I bore you in my chambers.'

As if to comfort himself in the aftermath of his misfortunes, Duncan's Achilles recites an old song from his mother, a promise,⁸⁸ seemingly offering an escape from pain, some time 'long ago' (line 2, above), before the worst events transpired in the Homeric version:

Manchild, She said,

*Come back to the shores of what you are.
 Come back to the crumbling shores.*

*All night
 the mothering tides in which your
 life first formed in the brooding
 light have quenched the bloody
 splendors of the sun
 and, under the triumphant processions
 of the moon, lay down
 thunder upon thunder of an old
 longing, the beat*

of whose repeated spell

⁸⁷ Murray (1924), Lattimore (1951), Fitzgerald (1974) and Hammond (1987).

⁸⁸ Thetis' reassuring promises to Achilles in Homer's text are for divinely orchestrated revenge against Agamemnon and the Greeks who stole his prize (*Il.* 1.419-27), and for divinely engineered armour to replace what was seized by the Trojans in battle (*Il.* 18.136-7).

consumes you. (stanzas 5-8)

As an alternative to the traumas of the Trojan war ('bloody/ splendors', 'triumphant processions', 'thunder upon thunder'), the nymph entices him back to the safety and bliss of a place beyond that clanging exhaustion, where the intensity has been 'quencht', and the martial sounds and functions have been reassigned to the silent 'moon' and 'the mothering tides', a gentle heart-'beat' of an 'old longing', for 'what you are' in the deepest sense. This longing appears to have 'consumed' Duncan, as attested in his essay 'Towards an Open Universe':

Tideflow under the sun and moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart, these rhythms lie deep in our experience and when we let them take over our speech there is a monotonous rapture of persistent regular stresses and waves of lines breaking rhyme after rhyme. There have been poets for whom this rise and fall, the mothering swell and ebb, was all. Amoebic intelligences, dwelling in the memorial of tidal voice, they arouse in our awake minds a spell, so that we let our awareness go in the urgent wave of the verse. The rhyming lines and the repeating meters persuade us. To evoke night and day or the ancient hypnosis of the sea is to evoke our powerful longing to fall back into periodic structure, into the inertia of uncomplicated matter.⁸⁹

What the poet attributes to Achilles, remembering the words of Thetis, is a recourse of solace available to all human beings, in his view, an imagined return to an original state, beyond the complication of separateness and language and attempted meaning, from which all suffering arises.

The poem continues with the hero's interpretation of his mother's offering, as a conveyance out of misery:

Thetis, then,
my mother, has promised me
the mirage of a boat, a vehicle
of water within the water,
and my soul would return from
the trials of its human state,
from the long siege, from the
struggling companions upon the plain,
from the burning towers and deeds
of honor and dishonor,
the deeper unsatisfied war beneath
and behind the declared war,
[...]

For Thetis, my mother, has promised
me a boat,
a lover, an up-lifter of my spirit

⁸⁹ Duncan (1985), 77.

into the rage of my first element
rising, a princedom
 in the unreal, a share in Death. (stanzas 9-10, 14)

The repeated line ‘Thetis, my mother, has promised me a boat’ is a specific recollection of *Iliad* 9.410-11.⁹⁰ In this new, mystical version, the pain and its opposite bliss are so close together, made of exactly the same material, that to escape from life into the peacefulness beyond it requires only ‘the mirage of a boat’, ‘a vehicle/ of water within the water’, that is, only the vessel of a single human being (‘a vehicle’), composed of the same matter and energy and consciousness as everything else (‘of water within the water’, a phrase suggesting a single drop leaping for a moment out of the ocean of existence, before falling back into it, with relief).

The final four lines of the poem follow an asterisk, and seem to be a return by Robert Duncan to his own voice. After channelling Achilles and (through his memory) Thetis, the poet recalls himself to the present moment:

*
Time, time. It’s time.

The business of Troy has long been done.

Achilles to Leuke has come home.

And soon you too will be alone. (stanza 14)

It appears that the speaker is anticipating his own imminent death. ‘Time, time. It’s time’ sounds the knell of an ending, to the poem, or to a particular life. Achilles has already departed and found rest (on Leuke, an island to which Thetis is said to have carried the remains or spirit of her son after death, in an alternative tradition of the story that, unlike the Homeric version, supports an afterlife),⁹¹ and ‘you’ – whether the poet-speaker, or the reader – will follow the same path soon enough. The final line (‘And soon you too will be alone’)

⁹⁰ On this image, invoking H.D.’s version, see Duncan (2011): ‘the “caravel” that in *Helen in Egypt* carries the hero Achilles to the shore of dreams where his Helen waits [...], the Boat of Dreams, the Boat of the Dead, was one of the great vehicles or images of poetry’ (127).

⁹¹ Cf. Apollodorus, *Epit.* E.5.5. Once again, this appears in *Helen in Egypt*, as the title of the middle section of the poem. The only note I could find on ‘Achilles’ Song’ from Duncan himself appears in the *Selected Poems*, and concerns the sounding of vowels: ‘NOTE: In our Anglo-American convention we would pronounce the diphthong in *Leuke* to foreshadow the rime in the word *you* – but in my hearing of the line, remembering the voice of H.D.’s reading from her *Helen in Egypt*, the name *Leuke* came to me sounded as in the German convention to echo the diphthong in *Troy*’ (Duncan (1993), 102).

might perhaps be mournful or chilling (read out of context as a warning of impending old age and banishment from life), were it not for the soothing, blissful depiction of death ('Death') that comprises the whole preceding poem. In Homer, Achilles recollects his mother's foresight: μήτηρ γάρ τέ μέ φησι θεὰ Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα/ διχθαδίας κῆρας φερέμεν θανάτοιο τέλος δέ ('My mother, the silver-footed goddess Thetis, says that I have two fates that could carry me to the end of death', *Il.* 9.410-11). θανάτοιο τέλος (411, 416) is translated variously as 'the doom of death' (Murray), 'my end in death' (Lattimore) and 'the end of death' (Hammond), all expressions of finality and loss. However, far from being a desolate obliteration of life, the state of loneliness that Duncan promises is wholeness by another name, the fortunate reunion of being no longer separate, and therefore once again 'alone', as one undivided consciousness.

Louise Glück: Distillation and Truth

Louise Glück is a major contemporary lyric poet,⁹² who writes in a distilled and oracular style, about the workings of the human heart in a painful world. In a thematic introduction to her work, Daniel Morris writes: 'Blurring the borders between modernist and contemporary styles, her poetry has been judged individualistic and universal, ordinary and oracular, momentary and mythic, tragic and comic'.⁹³ Glück's poems employ simple, everyday language and a standard, free verse form, often with short lines and short stanzas, and with poems rarely straying beyond a page or two in length. Her lyric voice typically narrates a poignant episode from her own life, or from that of a well-known figure of biblical

⁹² Louise Glück (1943-) was born in New York City, and attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. She has 'received virtually every national award for American poetry' (Morris (2006), 2), including the Pulitzer Prize and the Bollingen Prize. In 2003 she was named Poet Laureate of the United States. Glück has published eleven volumes of poetry, including one of the most interesting modern lyric receptions of the *Odyssey*, her work *Meadowlands* (1996), a collection of short, intimate poems reflecting on the dissolution of a marriage, alternating between contemporary and classical voices. The poet currently teaches at Yale University. For further details, see the introduction to Morris (2006), and a personal essay by Glück (1994a).

⁹³ Morris (2006), 21.

or classical literature, sometimes stepping directly into the perspective of the character.⁹⁴ The resulting reflections and receptions are often so plain that they may deflect inquiry, or even seem simplistic, at first glance. Take, for instance, the last two stanzas of ‘The Queen of Carthage’, a poem commenting on the Dido story in the *Aeneid*:

Now the Queen of Carthage
will accept suffering as she accepted favor:
to be noticed by the Fates
is some distinction after all.

Or one should say, to have honored hunger,
since the Fates go by that name also.⁹⁵

In my initial impression, this appeared to be a diluted synopsis of Dido’s end, with straightforward syntax, and self-effacing phrasing (‘after all’, ‘or one should say’, ‘also’). However, in an expert close reading, poet and scholar Rosanna Warren proves that, far from it, the modest, placid surface has depths to plumb. She writes:

It is the modernist diminishing move, to see in the Fates merely the lowercase appetite, hunger. Yet one doesn’t have to be sensitive to the powerful role of hunger as a metaphysical state in other poems by Glück to feel that this last couplet is not reductive: it endows a classical personified abstraction, the Fates, with physiological and ethical urgency and realism. It breaks beyond the classroom decorum of pious Aeneas and suffering Dido, and the poem’s own earlier, purposefully stilted diction. [...] Its final swerve of recognition (‘Or should one say’) presses into a dangerous realm of candor, the admission of hunger, and in so doing sees the ancient story as present, even timeless, elemental conflict and drive. Its reductive poetic method turns out to be justified as the form for disciplined lucidity in the wake of grief. The reduction intensifies. It becomes, even, a form of amplification.⁹⁶

Other scholars have likewise noted that Glück’s simplicity of statement conceals a complexity of suggestion.⁹⁷ Elizabeth Dodd commented on the lack of embellishment and conjunction in Glück’s somehow still loaded style: ‘There is something of the modernist passion for juxtaposition in her method: the desire to present rather than to explain, for simple linkage

⁹⁴ Glück’s receptions of Homer and Virgil include versions of Achilles (‘The Triumph of Achilles’ (1985)), Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Circe (these four appear throughout *Meadowlands* (1996)), Dido (‘The Queen of Carthage’ (1999)) and Aeneas (‘Roman Study’, ‘The Golden Bough’ (1999)). On the firm place of classical mythology in her imagination, Glück (1994a) wrote: ‘My mother read to us, then taught us to read very early. Before I was three, I was well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from the illustrations, became fundamental referents’ (7). For recent scholarship on Glück and Classics, see Fowler (2009) and Hurst (2009).

⁹⁵ Glück (1999).

⁹⁶ Warren (2008), 113.

⁹⁷ Glück (1994a) on the appeal of plain language: ‘From the time, at four or five or six, I first started reading poems, first thought of the poets as my companions, my predecessors – from the beginning I preferred the simplest vocabulary. [...] I loved those poems that seemed so small on the page but that swelled in the mind; I didn’t like the windy, dwindling kind’ (4).

rather than careful transition',⁹⁸ which leaves the reader to intuit the conclusions and connections implied, almost to experience them firsthand, beyond words. Joanne Diehl, in an introduction to the collected essays on Glück, remarks on 'those moments when the poet embraces the clarity of direct statement, those moments when language borders on silence, when thought cannot be more sparely articulated', and concludes that their 'force [...] achieves the authority of an oracular power',⁹⁹ great truths conveyed in stark, solemn utterances. As Glück herself declared: 'My poems are vertical poems. They aspire and they delve. They don't elaborate, or amplify,'¹⁰⁰ and thus appear still at first sight, but run deep.

The poet's interest in delving below the surface of things was likely sparked by her long-term experience of psychoanalysis in adolescence (which she undertook as treatment for anorexia),¹⁰¹ in which is posited a deeper self, beyond the habitual façade available to conscious awareness. In an astute phrase, Tony Hoagland observed in a review of *Meadowlands* that 'the wounded, partial self is Glück's perennial subject',¹⁰² and her whole career leans toward restoration. According to the Freudian approach, discovering and reclaiming the lost or hidden self requires abandoning rationality, in favour of a more instinctive, intuitive wisdom, which Glück seems to value in art, as well as in self-inquiry: 'The dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden, and the path of the hidden world is not inscribed by will',¹⁰³ in other words, is accessible only to deeper, more spontaneous forms of asking and knowing. Adam Phillips conceptualises an inherent link between therapy and creative writing in an interesting essay 'On Translating a Person':

After all, people come for psychoanalysis when their present language no longer works. Indeed, one could sensibly say that they are in need of translation; to move or be moved from one place to another, through language. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it in one of its several canonical definitions, they want to be removed 'from one place of interment or repose to another [, ...] to carry or convey to heaven without death'.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Dodd (1992), 177.

⁹⁹ Diehl (2005a), 2.

¹⁰⁰ Glück (1981), 117, quoted in Dodd (1992), 177.

¹⁰¹ Morris (2006), 24.

¹⁰² Hoagland (1996), 152.

¹⁰³ Glück (1994a), 7.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips (2002), 131.

Indeed Glück credits her seven years of therapy as personally and intellectually transporting, stating in a public essay ‘Education of the Poet’: ‘Analysis taught me how to think. [...] The longer I withheld conclusions, the more I saw’;¹⁰⁵ that is, maintaining detachment invites great insight (a belief that may have been linguistically transformative, too, accounting for the cool remove of her poetic style, even in the treatment of emotionally charged topics).

The pull toward deep knowledge has, for Glück, its own agency. The poet likens it to a hunger, recalling, ‘It seems to me spiritual hunger has driven my work from the beginning’, and then elaborating its role in her life:

I write [...] either in a sustained furious blitz or not at all. These rhythms are completely independent of the issues around earning a living: they have nothing to do with available time or available solitude. When I’m writing, I write anywhere. [...] I can also, ample evidence proves, not write anywhere: the bucolic serene, the pure uninterrupted privacy of the empty room do not reliably help me. [...] This fact seems to me quite liberating: [...] I am simply in the hands of something, some periodic hunger.¹⁰⁶

The reward for gratifying this urge is hard to pin down, although Glück points to it implicitly in various prose statements. Perhaps it relates to a hope of healing the partial self through communion with others, which the poet acknowledged as an inspiring impulse: ‘Contact, of the most intimate sort, is what poetry can accomplish. Poems do not endure as objects but as presences. When you read anything worth remembering, you liberate a human voice; you release into the world again a companion spirit. I read poems to hear that voice. And I write to speak to those I have heard’,¹⁰⁷ to generate a collective experience beyond individual limits. In addition, being engrossed in creation seems to provide, in Glück’s interpretation, a reprieve from the painful confusion of life. She writes of the artist’s only relief from bewilderment and emptiness:

What seems to me the source of resilience (or fortitude) is a capacity for intense, driven absorption [in work]. Such absorption makes a kind of intermission from the self. [...] At intervals throughout his life, the artist is taken out of that life by concentration; he lives for a time in a suspension that is also a quest, a respite that is also acute tension. His belief [is in] the hypothetical moment in which comprehensive darkness acquires limits and forms. [...] Toward which end, the artist, like the analyst, cultivates a disciplined refusal of self-deception, which is less a moral position than a pragmatic act, since the only possible advantage of suffering is that it may afford insight.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Glück (1994a), 12-13. This address was given on January 31, 1989, as the annual ‘Education of the Poet’ lecture at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

¹⁰⁶ Diehl (2005b), 186.

¹⁰⁷ Glück (1994b), 128.

¹⁰⁸ Glück (2005), 191.

In this view, writing is a search for meaning, for ‘limits and forms’ within an otherwise indecipherable ‘darkness’. An artist pushes toward ‘insight’, hoping to hit bedrock, some stable foundation beneath the ‘suffering’ of inexplicable flux. In reality, however, this consuming drive toward clarity often deserts the poet as suddenly as it gripped her in the first place, spitting her out cold, alone and stuck once again on the surface, stripped of her recent power of vision:

It seems to me that the desire to make art produces an ongoing experience of longing, a restlessness [...]. Always there seems something ahead, the next poem or story [...] seems to exist somewhere already finished. [...] What follows is a period of more concentrated work [...] absorbing as nothing else I have ever in my life known. And then the poem is finished, and at that moment, instantly detached: it becomes what it was first perceived to be, a thing always in existence. No record exists of the poet’s agency. And the poet, from that point, isn’t a poet anymore, simply someone who wishes to be one,¹⁰⁹

and the cycle begins again.

This elusive recourse Glück describes, something to rely on underneath the emptiness and noise of the prismatic human personality or experience, is a spiritual plane, related to the irreducible ‘essence’ of the universe, present in each person and moment in time. Glück speaks frequently in interviews and essays of this substance, as if it might motivate her poetry, for instance:

The true has about it an air of mystery or inexplicability. This mystery is an attribute of the elemental: art of the kind I mean to describe will seem the furthest concentration or reduction or clarification of its substance; it cannot be further refined without being changed in its nature. It is essence, ore, wholly unique, and therefore comparable to nothing. No ‘it’ will have existed before; what will have existed are other instances of like authenticity. The true, in poetry, is felt as insight. It is very rare, but beside it other poems seem merely intelligent comment.¹¹⁰

Glück’s work seems to aim for this truth, and find it hidden in the core of human lives. In an interview with Ann Douglas for the Columbia University magazine, the poet admitted: ‘I realize I have a craving for that which is immutable. The physical world is mutable. So, you cast about for those situations, or myths, that will answer the craving’.¹¹¹ Glück uses scenes from mythology, nature and her own life to reach this elemental possibility. The poet Diane Wakoski highlighted the archetypal meaning in small details or personal experience:

¹⁰⁹ Glück (1994a), 16.

¹¹⁰ Glück (1994c), 45.

¹¹¹ Glück (1981), 25, quoted in Morris (2006), 253.

There was something happening in those works [by Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg] which transcended the act of writing about oneself. [...] It involved using either the most dramatic and important details of one's life or the opposite, using something trivial, like a description of the furniture in your father's room. What this did was make the reader accept the emblematic reality of details and events. And what that leads to is a concept of personal mythology. Your father is not your father but an archetypal one. His room is not just a room but a place where important events occur. The poet, then, is a person willing to see his life as more than itself and his autobiographical technique, ironically, should leave autobiography behind.¹¹²

In Glück's work, in this way, the individual (whether personal or literary) seeks to become universal, with the mind dropped from the surface down to the bottom of the well, and the timeless truth of life perhaps revealed, for an instant.

In her now-famous lyric sequence *Meadowlands* (1996), Glück interweaves poems depicting a modern couple on the verge of divorce,¹¹³ with imagined scenes surrounding Odysseus' and Penelope's long separation in the *Odyssey*. Most of the poems in the volume are spoken in the first-person, and the voices come and go: an unnamed, unhappy woman, her husband, Penelope, Odysseus, their son Telemachus and the goddess Circe, all narrating personal quarrels, grievances and defences of self, in a mournful and wry reflection on the human condition of inevitable wounding and loss.¹¹⁴ In addition, and importantly for this chapter, Glück steps back from these private, domestic musings, in occasional poems of 'parable' throughout the volume, embodying in those moments her clearest oracular voice,¹¹⁵ serving as an impersonal, perceptive witness to the broad view, of which these small stories are simply fragments, or symbols. (As Warren observes of Glück's debt to Ezra Pound, 'the natural object is always the adequate symbol'.¹¹⁶) Bonnie Costello, in an essay on *Meadowlands*, defines the parable poems in this way:

They offer an outlet [...] for the poetic impulses suppressed, or hidden, elsewhere, especially the impulse to metaphor. [...] Like the chorus in a tragedy, parables are removed from the action of the main narrative, in order to comment on it. The form is abstract and impersonal, thus performing another distancing function. Like Jesus' parables, these explain but also obscure their meanings so that they are apparent to the reader but not to the historical

¹¹² Wakoski (1975), 4-5.

¹¹³ The inspiration was the breakdown of the poet's own second marriage (Morris (2006), 29).

¹¹⁴ For readings of the marriage poems in *Meadowlands*, ancient and modern, see Costello (2005), 48-62; Morris (2006), 231-54; and Doherty (2009), 196-200.

¹¹⁵ Glück (2006) observes, 'My earlier work is filled with Delphic distances'.

¹¹⁶ Warren (2008), 110, quoting E. Pound (March 1913) 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry* magazine.

characters. We see through a glass, darkly. Through the parables, Glück provides a comprehensive vision and anticipatory truth obscure to the players in the drama. [An] ethical wisdom (a wisdom without agency that can be heard in the ‘ah’s’ throughout this volume) marks the gap in knowledge characteristic of tragedy.¹¹⁷

This ‘gap in knowledge’ then serves as a warning, or fortunate lesson, to modern readers, to steer clear of similar traps in their own lives. I will explore one such parable, to illustrate Glück’s penetrating poetics of reception, whereby a simple scene derived from Homer becomes a window into life’s ‘essence’, in its most purified, and replenishing, form.

‘Parable of the Hostages’ appears early in the volume, and like so many of Glück’s poems, could be read straightforwardly, as a psychologised discussion of the thoughts of Homer’s Greek soldiers, poised in limbo on the shores of Troy, somewhere between the end of the *Iliad* and the start of the *Odyssey*.¹¹⁸ The two-page lyric poem begins,

The Greeks are sitting on the beach
wondering what to do when the war ends. No one
wants to go home, back
to that bony island; everyone wants a little more
of what there is in Troy, more
life on the edge, that sense of every day as being
packed with surprises. (lines 1-7)

This apparently simple narrative hits its first note of hidden depth, in the enjambment of these early lines, which end on words invoking ‘essence’: ‘one’, ‘more’, ‘more’ (that is, deeper, firmer, more enduring), ‘being’, and of course, the possibility of going ‘home’,¹¹⁹ returning to some original state, a question around which the whole poem will hinge. That these lines are symbolic is confirmed by comparison with a potential source passage for Glück’s imagined scenario: Book 2 of the *Iliad*. Since *Meadowlands* is concerned with stories relating to Odysseus, and since the Greeks could only have been ‘sitting on the beach/ wondering what to do when war ends’ while they were still at Troy, that is, while the story was still based in or

¹¹⁷ Costello (2005), 56-7, 58.

¹¹⁸ In its chronology, this poem belongs with the Epic Cycle, adding to Homer deferentially by filling the clear gap between the epics. This is a modest approach to the reception practice of addition, in contrast to the more rebellious style seen in Chapter 5 of this thesis (‘Epic Revision: Feminist Versions of the *Odyssey*), where tiny cracks in the texts are torn open and filled with huge new plot lines and perspectives, welcoming female and otherwise disenfranchised characters fully into the central narrative.

¹¹⁹ Other seemingly pointed enjambed line-endings, calling to mind something elemental underlying the visible, include ‘see’, ‘believed’, ‘unanswerable’, ‘know’, ‘is’ and ‘know’, from later lines in the poem.

near the time of the *Iliad*, a natural point of parallel between these texts could be an Iliadic appearance of Odysseus. I propose 2.134-454 as a productive option.

In *Iliad* 2, before the catalogue of ships (2.494-759), comes an episode in which Agamemnon tests the constancy of his forces, with an order to abandon the shores of Troy, and return home. He declares disingenuously:

έννέα δὴ βεβάασι Διὸς μεγάλου ένιαυτοί,
καὶ δὴ δοῦρα σέσηπε νεῶν καὶ σπάρτα λέλυνται·
αἱ δέ που ἡμέτεραὶ τ' ἄλογοι καὶ νήπια τέκνα
εἶατ' ἐνὶ μεγάροις ποτιδέγμεναι· ἄμμι δὲ ἔργον
αὐτῶς ἀκράαντον οὐ εἶνεκα δεῦρ' ἰκόμεσθα.
ἀλλ' ἄγεθ' ὡς ἂν ἐγὼ εἶπω πειθώμεθα πάντες·
φεύγωμεν σὺν νηυσὶ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν·
οὐ γὰρ ἔτι Τροίην αἰρήσομεν εὐρυάγυιαν. (2.134-41)

'Nine years now have passed from Zeus' store, and our ships' timbers have rotted and their rigging decayed. And our wives and young children are sitting in our homes, waiting for us: while the task which brought us here stands quite without completion. No, come, let us all do as I say – let us away with our ships to our own dear native land. We shall never now take the broad streets of Troy.'

The reaction of the Greek soldiers is loud delight, and fast action:

᾽Ως φάτο, τοῖσι δὲ θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι δῖνε
πᾶσι μετὰ πληθὺν ὅσοι οὐ βουλῆς ἐπάκουσαν·
[...]
λάβρος ἐπαιγίζων, ἐπὶ τ' ἡμῦνι ἀσταχύεσσιν,
ὡς τῶν πᾶσ' ἀγορῆ κινήθη· τοὶ δ' ἀλαλητῶ
νήας ἔπ' ἐσσεύοντο, ποδῶν δ' ὑπένερθε κονίη
ἴστατ' ἀειρομένη· τοὶ δ' ἀλλήλοισι κέλευον
ἄπτεσθαι νηῶν ἠδ' ἐλκέμεν εἰς ἅλα δῖαν,
οὐρούς τ' ἐξεκᾶθαιρον· αὐτὴ δ' οὐρανὸν ἴκεν
οἴκαδε ἰεμένων· ὑπὸ δ' ἦρεον ἔρματα νηῶν. (2.142-3, 149-54)

So he spoke, and his words lifted the hearts of all in the mass of the army, all those who were not privy to his purpose. [...] The men swarmed cheering to the ships, and under their feet the dust rose high in a cloud. They urged each other to lay hands to the ships and drag them down to the holy sea, and they set to clearing the slipways. Their shouts reached heaven as they surged for home: and they began to pull the props from under the ships.

This is the opposite of Glück's claim that 'No one/ wants to go home'; here everyone wants to go home. Indeed, the only way that Agamemnon's army in Homer is persuaded to turn around and stay, after this false offer, is by the intervention of Odysseus, who dashes around and attempts to reverse the men's decision with threats;¹²⁰ and by the goddess Athena, who eventually sways their hearts with divine magic:

¹²⁰ To the princes he warns, μή τι χολωσάμενος ῥέξιη κακὸν νῆας Ἀχαιῶν· / θυμὸς δὲ μέγας ἐστὶ διοτρεφῶν βασιλῆων ('I fear he [Agamemnon] may be enraged by this and do some harm to the sons of the Achaians. Kings ordained by god have an anger that runs high', 2.195-6); and to the common

σὺν τῇ παιφάσσουσα διέσσυτο λαὸν Ἀχαιῶν
ὀτρύνουσ' ἰέναι· ἐν δὲ σθένοσ ὄρσεν ἐκάστῳ
καρδίῃ ἄλληκτον πολεμίζειν ἠδὲ μάχεσθαι.
τοῖσι δ' ἄφαρ πόλεμος γλυκίων γένετ' ἠὲ νέεσθαι
ἐν νηυσὶ γλαφυρῆσι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν. (2.450-54)

With this [the aegis] in her hands she rushed darting through the Achaian army, spurring them on, and in each man's heart she raised the strength for warfare and battle without ceasing. Then war became a sweeter thought to them than returning in their hollow ships to their own dear native land.

The only person in Homer who does want 'more/ of what there is in Troy' (as in Glück's version)¹²¹ is Achilles:

Αὐτὰρ ὁ μήνιε νηυσὶ παρήμενος ὠκυπόροισι
διογενῆσ Πηλεῆσ υἱὸσ πόδασ ὠκύσ Ἀχιλλεύσ·
οὔτέ ποτ' εἰσ ἀγορὴν πωλέσκετο κυδιάνειραν
οὔτέ ποτ' ἐσ πόλεμον, ἀλλὰ φθινύθεσκε φίλον κῆρ
αὔθι μένων, ποθέεσκε δ' αὐτὴν τε πτόλεμόν τε. (1.488-92)

The royal son of Peleus, swift-footed Achilles, still sat idle by his speedy ships and kept up his anger. He would not ever go to the assembly where men win glory, nor into the fighting, but stayed where he was, wasting his heart out day after day, and yearning for the clamor of battle.

But, of course, Achilles is blinded by his raging (μήνιε), against Agamemnon who stole his captive Briseis. The implication of this intertext, then, is that the Greeks' aversion to going 'home' in Glück's version is a kind of blindness, a distraction by fear, magic or wrath, from seeing clearly and acting wisely, about the need to return to the source of things.

Glück's parable continues:

But how to explain this
to the ones at home to whom
fighting a war is a plausible
excuse for absence, whereas
exploring one's capacity for diversion
is not. Well, this can be faced
later; these
are men of action, ready to leave
insight to the women and children. (lines 7-15)

Returning to *Iliad 2*, again works to illuminate a deeper resonance in these lines. After

Odysseus averts a mass departure, by driving the soldiers back to the assembly spot, the hero

announces:

soldiers, δαίμόνι' ἀτρέμασ ἦσο καὶ ἄλλων μῦθον ἄκουε, / οἱ σέο φέρτεροί εἰσι, σὺ δ' ἀπτόλεμος καὶ ἄνακλις/ οὔτέ ποτ' ἐν πολέμῳ ἐναριθμιοσ οὔτ' ἐνὶ βουλῇ ('Sit quiet and listen to what others tell you, your superiors – you are a coward and a weakling, of no account either in war or in counsel', 2.200-202).

¹²¹ In Hammond's translation of Homer, what is available in Troy is 'joyless hardship' (πόνον ἀμέγαρτον, 2.420).

Ἀτρεΐδῃ νῦν δὴ σε ἄναξ ἐθέλουσιν Ἀχαιοὶ
πᾶσιν ἐλέγχιστον θέμεναι μερόπεσσι βροτοῖσιν,
οὐδέ τοι ἐκτελέουσιν ὑπόσχεσιν ἦν περ ὑπέσταν
ἐνθάδ' ἔτι στείχοντες ἀπ' Ἄργεος ἵπποβότοιο
Ἴλιον ἐκπέρσαντ' εὐτείχεον ἀπονέεσθαι.
ὣς τε γὰρ ἢ παῖδες νεαροὶ χῆραὶ τε γυναῖκες
ἀλλήλοισιν ὀδύρονται οἶκον δὲ νέεσθαι. (2.284-90)

‘Son of Atreus [Agamemnon], as things are, my lord, the Achaians are intent on bringing you into utter disgrace before all mortal men, and they will not make good the promise they undertook while still on their journey here from horse-rearing Argos, that they would return only after you had sacked well-walled Ilios. Like young children or widowed women they wail to each other about their return to their homes.’

Likewise the wise old man Nestor moves to embarrass the army into compliance: ὦ πόποι ἦ δὴ παισὶν εἰκότεες ἀγοράασθε/ νηπιάχοις οἷς οὐ τι μέλει πολεμῆϊα ἔργα (‘Shame on you! You behave in assembly like children, little children who have no concern for the doings of war’, 2.337-8). Perhaps Glück’s remark, that the Greeks are ‘ready to leave/ insight to the women and children’, relates to these insults, as if the soldiers have been shamed into turning their backs on that aspect of themselves, the ‘womanly’ or ‘childish’ side that would like to return ‘home’, or (symbolically) to turn toward ‘insight’, the deeper, more stable planes of reality that might exist beneath the raging wars (the ‘surprises’, from above, Glück’s line 7) on the surface. Odysseus and Nestor imply that there is something weak about wanting the stability of ‘home’. Glück admits the inadequacy of escape, since longing for permanence is futile in a universe in constant flux; but she nonetheless defends the validity of the questing spirit, whose tireless ‘wanting’ leads to something else valuable, even if it never quite attains full homecoming. In an interview with Joanne Diehl, Glück attests:

The artist views that thing he might make, or dreams of making, as better than the self (though contaminated by, built out of the self). Contentment in being (of the kind that postulates the existing self as a kind of apotheosis) is, to me, a kind of dread. That and more is what the artist wants, I believe. All of us who are trying, somehow, to make something durable are driven by longing, and helped along by whatever allows the belief that the thing that eludes will one day no longer elude.¹²²

The dream of ‘something durable’ can, as Glück sees it, motivate a whole, arguably productive life, whether or not it is ever fully realised in art or individual experience.

The Greek soldiers in Glück’s parable are at risk of forgetting this deeper level of reality. The next lines hint at the danger of remaining blindly on the surface:

¹²² Glück (2005b), 185-6.

Thinking things over in the hot sun, pleased
 by a new strength in their forearms, which seem
 more golden than they did at home, some
 begin to miss their families a little,
 to miss their wives, to want to see
 if the war has aged them. And a few grow
 slightly uneasy: what if war
 is just a male version of dressing up,
 a game devised to avoid
 profound spiritual questions? Ah,
 but it wasn't only the war. The world had begun
 calling them, an opera beginning with the war's
 loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens. (lines 16-28)

The soldiers' uneasiness is validated by the sage narrator's 'Ah', echoing unbrokenly out into the space beyond the end of the line. These men have good reason to feel troubled: they have become stuck in perceiving the whole 'world' as a 'game', a 'version of dressing up', colourful and decorated and pleasing in appearance, but distracting from the true, more simple meaning underneath – the 'essence' that permeates this poem, and, in Glück's view, reality in general. This outward world in which the Greeks are swept up, and to which they are growing ever more attached (not even wanting to go home), is actually 'an opera beginning with the war's/ loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens', that is, a performance arising sometime before the *Iliad* and ceasing in the world of the *Odyssey*. Perhaps an epic poem is another implied analogy for this engaging but artificial, fleeting side of life.

Unfortunately Glück's characters, her archetypal symbols for this implicitly very easy, very human mistake, are already lost, trapped by their own devising in the superficial world, forgoing the chance to look for the meaning underneath ('ready to leave/ insight to the women and children', including this female poet). The 'Parable of the Hostages' concludes with this distilled warning:

There on the beach, discussing the various
 timetables for getting home, no one believed
 it could take ten years to get back to Ithaca;
 no one foresaw that decade of insoluble dilemmas – oh unanswerable
 affliction of the human heart: how to divide
 the world's beauty into acceptable
 and unacceptable loves! On the shores of Troy,
 how could the Greeks know
 they were hostage already: who once
 delays the journey is
 already enthralled; how could they know

that of their small number
some would be held forever by the dreams of pleasure,
some by sleep, some by music? (lines 29-42)

According to these lines, whoever succumbs to the insubstantial ‘dreams of pleasure’ in the comforts of immediate experience is ‘already enthralled’ by ephemera (‘sleep’ that ends, ‘music’ that fades and leaves a vacuum of silence, immediately waiting to be filled),¹²³ a ‘hostage’ already cut off from looking more deeply to the eternal, ever-present consolation at the core of life, the irreducible quality common to every person and moment. In its final stage, this poem about life’s essence, becomes a site for revelation, for ‘essence’ itself to break through in its purest expression: ‘how to divide the world’s beauty into acceptable and unacceptable loves!’ This ‘unanswerable’ exclamation, like a Zen koan, is suspended in the mind for a split second, before falling straight to the heart of things, cracked open by deepest intuition: in fact, the world’s beauty is indivisible, beyond subjectivity and difference, and all love is for the same thing – immutable presence or being, which is the only stable meaning possible in a world of flux.

¹²³ These temptations of ‘sleep’ and ‘music’ also invoke memories of the Sirens (*Od.* 12.184-91), and of Tennyson’s poem ‘The Lotos-Eaters’ (1832).

3. Epic Poetics: Digression, Simile and *Katabasis* in Twentieth-Century War Poetry

War poems comprise another interesting category of modern American receptions of ancient epic. The genre of ‘war poetry’ in general is defined inclusively,¹ spanning both long and short verse on a multiplicity of subjects related to war (scenes of battle and grief; exposés of war’s crimes and psychological aftermath; political commentaries on warfare; reflections on war in history) by a diverse range of poets, including combat veterans, noncombatant military personnel and civilians experiencing any aspect of a conflict, either in a war zone or second-hand from home. The degree of personal exposure necessary for writing a ‘valid’ war poem is contested, but most critics seem to agree that ‘authenticity does not require actual experience’,² as long as the resulting poetry is memorable and affecting.³

References to Homer and Virgil appear in war poems by a variety of American poets throughout the twentieth century, including the civilians Allen Tate and Wallace Stevens,⁴ the stateside Air Force instructor Randall Jarrell,⁵ and the active pacifist Robert Lowell.⁶ The most distinctive receptions of epic in American war poetry, however, are written by actual

¹ E.g. McLoughlin (2011), 9-10.

² Tatum (2003), 122. Tatum mentions, as an example, the American poet Randall Jarrell, who trained bombing navigators in Arizona during World War II, who is arguably ‘as substantial a “war poet” as Wilfred Owen, but never saw a day of combat’ (34).

³ See Stallworthy (2005) on the potential for perpetuating numbness through second-hand accounts: ‘[Anthony Hecht] is a poet burdened with the responsibility of bearing witness to the ultimate brutality of the Second World War. He served with the Infantry Division that discovered Flossenburg, an annex of Buchenwald. [...] After the war, his Jewish imagination seared with what he had seen and read, Hecht discharged his responsibility to the dead, to history, in one of the war’s most powerful poems, ‘More Light! More Light’. [...] [The poem] shocks an exposed nerve. This is its function and its value and, in this, it has something in common with the reporting of a first-class war-correspondent like Robert Fiske. The difference – and it’s a crucial difference – is that we can hold [such poems] in our memory, as we cannot retain the frontline journalism of a Fiske – or, for that matter, the frontline letters of an Owen. [...] The charge against a poem like [conscientious objector Robert] Lowell’s ‘Women, Children, Babies, Cows, Cats’ is that, far from shocking an exposed nerve, it has the numbing effect of second-hand journalism, thereby contributing to the insensitive apathy that enables us to turn, unmoved, from our newspaper’s coverage of disaster to that of a football match’ (Stallworthy (2005), 11-13).

⁴ E.g. Tate’s poems ‘Ode to the Confederate Dead’ and ‘Aeneas at New York’ allude to *Il.* 6 and *Aen.* 2 respectively. In his important piece ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, Stevens mentions ‘Virgilian cadences’, in a section contrasting the work of a soldier with the work of a poet.

⁵ E.g. Jarrell’s poem ‘When Achilles Fought and Fell’.

⁶ E.g. Lowell’s most elaborate receptions of Homer and Virgil, in which he casts Achilles, Odysseus and Aeneas as brutal and blood-thirsty warriors: ‘The Killing of Lykaon’, ‘Achilles to the Dying Lykaon’, ‘Ulysses and Circe’ and ‘Falling Asleep over the Aeneid’.

veterans, and three such poems provide the focus for this chapter.⁷ These pieces form an essential part of the map of lyric receptions of epic in American poetry, since they share a clear and unique mode of relation to the original works of Homer and Virgil, that of recreating an isolated poetic device. Officers throughout the past century have written short poems that lift a single literary element from epic (explicitly from Homer in the three cases I consider here, though also from Virgil by inevitable extension) and adapt it to a scene from their modern experience of war. John Peale Bishop (World War I) borrows narrative digression; William Meredith (World War II) writes free-standing epic similes; and Doug Anderson (the Vietnam War) imagines a brief modern-day *katabasis*, the journey to the underworld famously undertaken by the heroes Odysseus and Aeneas.

That American veterans should allude to ancient epic in their work is perhaps, at first glance, unsurprising, given the famously intertextual quality of war poetry. Scholars have detected links to past war poems in almost all modern versions (with favourite source texts including versions by Homer, Wilfred Owen and W.H. Auden),⁸ and these allusions are often interpreted from two angles. On one hand, such references are sometimes understood as arising from general cultural context, particularly formal education, in which many future war poets encountered poetry from past conflicts in textbook anthologies, popular magazines or translation courses, years before they ever experienced war for themselves, and to which they perhaps think back or return (however unconsciously) later in their lives, when undertaking their own modern responses to war. Alternatively, intertextuality in war poetry can be read as a more conscious gesture of affiliation, sparked by a feeling of gloomy comradeship with earlier soldier-poets based on the sense (recurrently noted by war writers, especially veterans) that all wars are, on a fundamental level, the same. See, for instance, Tim O'Brien's assertion in *Going After Cacciato*:

⁷ Other examples appear in the footnotes throughout this chapter, divided by theme. My catalogue includes many veteran poets, but nine who wrote receptions of Homer and Virgil that register specifically as war poems: Doug Anderson, R.L. Barth, John Peale Bishop, John Ciardi, Louis Coxe, Alan Dugan, Anthony Hecht, William Meredith and Howard Nemerov.

⁸ See Goldensohn (2003) on these major strains of influence in modern war poetry.

[W]ar is war no matter how it's perceived. War has its own reality. War kills and maims and rips up land and makes orphans and widows. These are the things of war. Any war. So when I say that there's nothing new to tell about Nam, I'm saying it was just a war like every war. [...] I'm saying that the *feel* of war is the same in Nam or Okinawa – the emotions are the same, the same fundamental stuff is seen and remembered. [...] I'll wager that troops at Hasting or the Bulge had the same problem.⁹

Catherine McLoughlin admits that this claim for a 'likeness of experience' shared across history by everyone who has lived through a war has become a trope that is adapted and exploited in literature; but she argues that underlying this artistic technique is a genuine impression of parallelism, which motivates the allusiveness of war literature: 'There can be sensed real affinities as individuals experience war and recognize what they have read', and then explore the congruities by invoking 'what they have read' in their own work. It is these 'real affinities', I believe, that begin to account for American veteran receptions of Homer and Virgil.

Modern Warfare and the Insufficiency of Language

I propose that ancient epic appealed to the soldier-poets of my study at first (simply) on the level of affinity, and then (more constructively) as a source of alternative methods for conveying meaning, solutions for surmounting the innumerable obstacles that often hinder a person from writing adequately about war. The challenges of communicating traumatic experiences, like war, are diverse and acute. McLoughlin recites the difficulties in the introduction to her lucid book:

There are myriad reasons why war is impossible to represent: logistical difficulties; censorship and self-censorship; squeamishness (on the part of the writer, publisher and reader); the particular difficulties involved in conveying physical pain; the inhibiting psycho-physiological effects of trauma; moral considerations ranging from exploitation of others' suffering to voyeurism to sadism; an absence of sympathetic response; ethical-aesthetic factors such as taste, sensibility and responsibility.[...] *Authoring War* concentrates on the specific challenges of epistemology, scale, space, time, language and logic.¹⁰

⁹ O'Brien (1978), 190-1, quoted in McLoughlin (2011), 14.

¹⁰ McLoughlin (2011), 17. The challenges of writing war literature have long been recognised by creative writers as well. McLoughlin refers to a letter from Hemingway: 'One of [my] book's premises is the belief that war, as a subject, is the greatest test of a writer's skills of evocation, a belief shared by Ernest Hemingway, who commented in a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald that "it [war] groups the maximum of material and speeds up the action and brings out all sorts of stuff that normally you would

These impediments at worst cripple a writer into silence, if perceived to be insuperable; and at least cause anxiety about his or her abilities, and about the insufficiency of language to convey the experiences he or she feels obliged to share. Even ‘successful’ war poems never manage to express the full traumas of wartime. As Kalí Tal explains in her monograph on the literature of trauma in general (including work catalysed by the Holocaust, Vietnam and sexual abuse): ‘Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition[s], textual representations [...] are mediated by language and do not have the impact of the traumatic experience’.¹¹

Despite the obviously impossible nature of the task, many survivors of war still feel compelled to write about their trials. Again McLoughlin is helpful in enumerating the various facets of the issue:

[E]ven as it resists representation, conflict demands it. The reasons that make war’s representation imperative are as multitudinous as those which make it impossible: to impose discursive order on the chaos of conflict and so to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others (those who were there and can no longer speak for themselves and those who were not there and need to be told); to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialize; to inform civilians of the nature of battle so as to facilitate the reintegration of veterans into peacetime society; to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning to promote peace.¹²

In bridging this gap between an impossible goal, and the compulsion to attempt it, the three poets of my chapter have achieved a degree of success (at least on a modest scale, in the compelling poems discussed here); and their collective, partial and momentary victory over the limitations of language is affected through the techniques of Homeric-Virgilian epic.

Paul Fussell suggested that, during wartime moments in the life of an educated soldier, ‘literature leaks in’, resulting in an experience in part determined by past reading. As McLoughlin puts it: ‘Perceptions (as well as representations) of warfare are shaped by previous representations’.¹³ In other words, the well-educated officers of this chapter may

have to wait a lifetime to get”. Other areas of human experience – love and grief spring to mind – have their own representational challenges, but war is specially charged because huge in scale, devastating in impact and encompassing of human behaviour in its greatest trials and intimacies’ (9). (Quotation from Ernest Hemingway (1981) *Selected Letters 1917-1961*, London: Granada, 176.)

¹¹ Tal (1996), 15.

¹² McLoughlin (2011), 7.

¹³ McLoughlin (2011), 13.

have both represented and perceived their battle experiences through engagement with Homer and Virgil. The converse is equally true, that people later interpret war texts through the lens of their own wartime experiences. James Winn remembers, for instance:

I was studying the *Iliad* in Greek during my last semester as an undergraduate, the spring term of 1968. American cities had exploded in riots the previous summer, and a frustrating, unpopular war was dividing the nation. During one short semester, draft deferments for graduate study ended, President Johnson declined to seek a second term, and assassins ended the lives of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Perhaps because of those circumstances, certainly because of a superb teacher, I learned to read the *Iliad* as a tragic poem describing men driven to their deaths by a system they could not change. Four decades later, I still believe that reading is true.¹⁴

Especially because of the widespread teaching of epic in university translation courses, both of these dynamics are crucial for explaining modern American veteran receptions of Homer and Virgil.

By recognising analogues for their real-life experiences in certain poetic devices from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, and then using those devices as the sole framework for short new poems striving to represent certain realities of modern warfare, the poets of this chapter conceive a unique way of giving access to trauma through poetry. The epic devices recreated in these modern war poems convey meaning by invoking an ancient genre; by setting up complex comparisons between the original story and the soldier's modern situation; and by prompting circular reading, in which readers re-interpret the relevant passages from Homer through the lens of the new poem (that is, essentially, through the eyes of a war veteran), creating an almost firsthand experience of the warped perception of familiar things that can result from war trauma. In addition, the genre in general is as closely suited to the task as possible: the intensity of the lyric compression and precision of the poetic form matches the intensity of wartime experience, whereas the more diffuse, familiar or ambling conventions of prose might have fallen short.

On the most basic level, an explicit reference to Homer or Virgil in a twentieth-century war poem bypasses more recent poetic traditions, and instantly aligns the new poem with the genre of epic. The attractions of this classical form for a modern war poet must be numerous. By tradition, epic was the natural medium for narrating and recording tales of war.

¹⁴ Winn (2008), 49.

In fact, 'warfare was such a part of epic that in Rome [the word] *bella* ("wars") could stand as a convenient shorthand for the genre'.¹⁵ Furthermore, epic conventionally allowed for the exploration and questioning, not simply the celebration or uncomplicated praise, of its chosen topic.¹⁶ For poets jaded and disillusioned by their military service, a poetic mode that admits moral ambiguities and subtleties into the treatment of war, that is open to beauty and horror, doubt and dissent, is understandably appealing. In addition, epic was the product of a 'barbaric age', just as modern war poems arose from the regressive, barbaric experience of warfare.¹⁷ The genre aims, and is proven, to last, promising a certain immortality and memorial to its subjects,¹⁸ possibly giving meaning to otherwise meaningless suffering. Culturally, in the twentieth-century U.S., epic was still elite and respected, and so a clear allusion to Homer or Virgil granted a degree of intellectual and political authority to a new poem from an otherwise often marginalised perspective.¹⁹ Even in ancient times, epic was considered the most prestigious genre for a poet to undertake,²⁰ and American veterans perhaps muster the weight of this lofty tradition in seeking to secure notice for their combat stories. For poets, then, the simple act of referring to ancient epic in a modern war poem breaks the ice, so to speak, in the difficult process of communicating war to non-veteran audiences, and conveys certain advantageous meanings about the new poem's aims and allegiances straight away.

¹⁵ E.g. in Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.3; Horace, *Ars Poetica* 73; Ovid *Amores* 1.1. See Pitcher (2009), 73.

¹⁶ Hainsworth (1991), 6. See also Taplin (1992) on the complexity and ethical ambiguity of the *Iliad*: 'The late eighth and early seventh century BC was not a time of unquestioned authority and social structure – such questions were open. Epic was a way of exploring political development by setting up difficult questions, questions which in real life might be intolerably confused and explosive' (63).

¹⁷ Hainsworth (1991), 9.

¹⁸ Pitcher (2009), 72-3.

¹⁹ Tal (1996) called the literature of trauma (including war poetry) 'a marginal literature' that is constantly at risk of being 'rewritten' and 'codified' by mainstream political powers to reflect their own goals and perspectives (6). For instance, 'it was politically expedient [...] for the dominant U.S. interests to attempt to rewrite history after the Vietnam War', particularly with regard to the brutality of Americans in combat, which was well documented by veterans, who even likened their own actions to Nazi atrocities from World War II (11-13). Such insights were unsurprisingly suppressed or ignored by politicians, and thus were forgotten by most audiences. Perhaps invoking ancient epic is a poet's attempt to gain a foothold for a distressing poem that might otherwise be censored or overlooked.

²⁰ E.g. Harrison (2007), 9, on Virgil's career as a generic 'ascent' beginning in pastoral (*Eclogues*), progressing through didactic (*Georgics*) and culminating in epic (*Aeneid*).

On a more specific level, each veteran poet discussed below excerpts a discrete poetic convention – narrative digression, simile and the journey to the underworld – from Homer, all to the same end, of abetting their efforts to overcome the limitations of language and write successfully about war.

John Peale Bishop: Digression from the Front

John Peale Bishop,²¹ who attended Princeton with Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald and engaged in a lifelong correspondence with Allen Tate, served as an infantry officer in France in the Great War,²² and is considered (despite his relative obscurity today) one of America's few important veteran poets from that conflict.²³ Although Bishop alludes to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* repeatedly throughout his work,²⁴ his most affecting and systematic reception of epic is a narrative war poem entitled 'And When the Net was Unwound Venus was Found Ravelled with Mars'.²⁵ The piece likens a soldier's wartime sexual encounter to a famous myth from the *Odyssey* – the story of adulterous Aphrodite and her lover Ares, caught in the act by her husband Hephaestus, who fashions an invisible net to envelop them in bed (*Od.* 8.266-366).

²¹ John Peale Bishop (1892-1944) was classically educated at Mercersburg Academy (a private boys' boarding school in Pennsylvania) and Princeton University, and felt a lifelong affinity for the South (through his mother's Virginian family), including the Virgilian values espoused by the Agrarian poets. In a review after Bishop's death, Arrowsmith (1949) described him as a 'would-be Vergilian', who 'saw quite clearly [...] that the major role of the major artist was the wilful creation of an American culture, in its absence', but never managed to create such a culture himself (124). Although no formal biography of the poet exists, further details of his life may be found in Tate (1948), Arrowsmith (1949) and Simpson (1982).

²² Simpson (1982), 480. In his preface to Bishop's *Collected Poems*, Allen Tate describes his connection with the poet as 'a long and affectionate friendship' (xi), and gives details of Bishop's army service: 'In the First World War he was a First Lieutenant of Infantry, in the 84th Division, and remained in Europe until 1919 in command of a detachment guarding German prisoners' (xiii).

²³ Two others are Archibald MacLeish and E.E. Cummings – together with Bishop 'too few to constitute a group', in contrast to the many significant British soldier-poets of World War I (Shapiro (2003), xx). For epic receptions in British war poetry, see Vandiver (2010).

²⁴ E.g. in *The Collected Poems* (Tate (1948)), the poems 'Experience the West' (78), 'Hecuba's Rage' (88), 'Farewell to Many Cities' (89), 'Why They Waged War' (104) and 'Whom the Gods Love' (104).

²⁵ Bishop (1948), 14. In a letter to Bishop planning the poem's first publication in *Poetry* magazine, Tate called it 'superb' (Young (1981), 53).

At first glance, the Homeric episode bears little resemblance to Bishop's poem. In Homer, the tale is sung for Odysseus during an athletic competition, a brief respite of entertainment on his weary journey home. The bard Demodocus tells a straightforward and formulaic story of gods and goddesses as tricksters and adulterers, which has a light-hearted effect on the characters witnessing the events in the narrative (ἄσβεστος δ' ἄρ' ἐνώρτο γέλωσ μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι/ τέχνας εισορόωσι πολύφρονος Ἥφαιστοιο, 'uncontrollable laughter arose among the blessed gods, as they looked on the trick that cunning Hephaistos had worked', *Od.* 8.326-7), and on the audience listening to the song at the games (ταῦτ' ἄρ' αἰοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς/ τέρπετ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶν ἧσιν ἀκούων ἠδὲ καὶ ἄλλοι/ Φαίηκες δολιχῆρετμοι, ναυσικλυτοὶ ἄνδρες, 'Odysseus listened to it with delight in his heart, together with the Phaiacians, masters of the long oar and famed for their ships', *Od.* 8.367-9).

Bishop, by contrast, depicts a private and delicately characterised liaison between a soldier and his new lover,²⁶ which moves the soldier to reflect mournfully on the many young casualties of the war. The only explicit reference to Homer in Bishop's poem is the unwieldy title – 'And When the Net was Unwound Venus was Found Ravelled with Mars' – which recounts the outcome of Hephaestus' trick (*Od.* 8.295-311). However, the poem is thick with other subtle echoes of the *Odyssey*, near-parallel imagery, plot elements and characterisation that combine to complicate and mythologise Bishop's modern war story, and convey meanings uniquely accessible through the Homeric comparison. Consider these lines from Homer's tale, in which Hephaestus lays his trap:

Ἥφαιστος δ' ὡς οὖν θυμαλγέα μῦθον ἄκουσε,
βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν ἐς χαλκεῶνα, κακὰ φρεσὶ βυσσοδομεύων·
ἐν δ' ἔθετ' ἀκμοθέτῳ μέγαν ἄκμονα, κόπτε δὲ δεσμοὺς
ἀρρήκτους ἀλύτους, ὄφρ' ἔμπεδον αὐθι μένοιεν.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δὴ τεύξε δόλον κεχολωμένος Ἄρει,
βῆ ῥ' ἴμεν ἐς θάλαμον, ὅθι οἱ φίλα δέμνια κεῖτο·
ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρ' ἐρμίσιν χέε δέσματα κύκλῳ ἀπάντη,

²⁶ The woman may even be a prostitute. That the encounter is a transaction, rather than a tryst, is suggested by several details in the poem. First of all, an unattractive woman (whose face 'bristled like a boar' and from whose mouth protruded a 'toothed fang') whom the narrator addresses as 'Madam' leads him upstairs to the bedroom and then departs (stanzas 1-4). The soldier observes that 'we were not the first/ [...] to bed/ between those sheets'; and recalls, 'I think I must have paid/ with something like despair' (stanza 4). When left alone with the woman in the bedroom, 'after a long touch of arms/ I plead, *Do you like love?* She answered *Love?*', as if that sensation were unknown to her, or at least irrelevant to the current situation (stanza 5).

πολλὰ δὲ καὶ καθύπερθε μελαθρόφιν ἐξεκέχυντο,
ἦ ἤτ' ἀράχνια λεπτά· τὰ γ' οὐδέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο,
οὐδὲ θεῶν μακάρων· περὶ γὰρ δολόεντα τέτυκτο. (*Od.* 8.272-81)

So when Hephaistos heard this painful tale, he went off to his forge, brooding ugly thoughts. He set his great anvil on the anvil-block, and began forging chains that could not be broken or undone, so the lovers would be fixed fast where they were. Then when he had made this trap in his anger at Ares, he went to the bedroom where his own bed lay, and spread the chains all round the bed-posts, with many hanging too from the beam above – all light as spiders' webs, that no one could see, not even the blessed gods: such was the cunning of his craftsmanship.

Elements from this passage are recreated in Bishop's version. Hephaestus preparing the bed (*Od.* 8.276-81) becomes the 'Madam', leading the soldier to the bedchamber. Reminiscent of the lame god (περικλυτὸς ἀμφιγυήεις, *Od.* 8.300), this woman has 'strange feet' and, in climbing the stairs, appears to be 'taking flight for heaven', as if herself divine. The implied clanging of Hephaestus' anvil as he forges the metal net (*Od.* 8.273-5) becomes in Bishop's scene 'a sound of keys' in the Madam's hand, and then 'a noise of keys/ to rattle upon a door that opened/ upon the bed' (stanza 3). The bed in the modern story is 'hung' with 'adulterous crimson', drapery that recalls the gossamer net in Homer, suspended around the bedposts and from the roofbeams to catch the adulterous god and goddess (*Od.* 8. 277-81). The soldier and his lover fall asleep (stanza 8) like Ares and Aphrodite (κατέδραθον, *Od.* 8.296), and wake up laughing in each other's arms – a circumstance that recalls and sweetens the Homeric version, in which Ares and Aphrodite wake in each other's arms, but are rudely greeted by the laughter of on-looking gods (*Od.* 8.326-7).²⁷

Bishop's waking soldier faces a harsh reality too, not a mocking crowd of peers, but the remembered possibility of his imminent death, sanctioned by his leaders and beyond his control. This sorrow is explained in the closing stanzas of the poem:

This was in the time of the long war
when the old deliberated and always rose
to the same decision: More of the young
must die.

Of them I remember and their nights
her warmth as of a million suns.

²⁷ Other passing images in Bishop's poem – 'blessed wood' and 'a thread like time's' (stanza 4) – also recall phrases from the Greek passage: 'blessed gods' (θεῶν μακάρων, μάκαρες θεοὶ, μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι, *Od.* 8.281, 306, and 326) and 'fine as spiders' webs' (ἦ ἤτ' ἀράχνια λεπτά, *Od.* 8.280).

In other words, this sexual story has been the reflection of a soldier in the Great War, one of many who have already, or might soon, die in battle, sent forth at the mercy of politicians and military commanders.²⁸ This image of a wartime soldier as the victim of outside forces emerges prominently in the poetry of World War I, most famously in Wilfred Owen's images of his trench comrades as sacrificial victims.²⁹ The impression of victimisation was caused for soldiers in large part by the vast 'gap between combatant and home front', between men in the trenches and their family, friends, fellow Americans and leaders at a safe remove.³⁰ According to Goldensohn, 'a severe censorship of battlefield events' in the media during this period intensified the perceived chasm: 'During World War I, the bewildering stoppage of information would only make the trench poet's indignation keener, as in many cases he put into his writing his sense of betrayal by politicians at home and chateau generals, as well as by citizen ignorance'.³¹

Bishop foreshadows, reinforces and complicates his plain statement of victimisation at the end of the poem by alluding to Homer's myth at the beginning. Like the modern soldier

²⁸ The narrator in Bishop's poem is never overtly identified, but his perspective resonates with the veteran Odysseus (like Odysseus watching dancers at the banquet, who 'gazed at the flashing of their feet and marveled in spirit' (*Od.* 8.262-5), Bishop's narrator repeatedly notices and describes the feet of the women in the poem: the Madam 'shuffling along the corridor' (stanza 1); 'her strange feet/ made no sound upon the stairs' (stanza 2); 'I saw those feet that padded on the floor-tiles/ still without sound' (stanza 4); and the lover who 'suddenly[...]/ left her dress and her feet were on the floor' (stanza 6)). It also resonates with the biography of the poet himself, whose own years as an officer in World War I could inform the mournful memory of these final lines. As Arrowsmith (1949) observed, 'Bishop's poetry bears profoundly the impress of his own experience. The life is more than ordinarily involved with the verse' (118).

²⁹ Goldensohn (2003), 18. On the gradual evolution of war poetry in human history, from celebrating heroism to decrying violence, Goldensohn writes: 'Continuity in the war lyric competes with change, and antipathy to war clashes with love of war in a long and tidal argument. But decade by decade, century by century, it becomes harder to justify heart-sinking results that continue to bring us dubious freedoms, qualified victory, and immersion in suffering; or that make us part of populations that become vengeful or complicit or indifferent about the regressive savagery inflicted on others. [...] As the number of [dead] continues to rise [over time], the need to view war as pathology, as an illness from which all need to be healed, puts itself more insistently beside the fatalism that accepts the inevitability of war or wallows too comfortably in its tragic dignities, which are unarguably many' (5).

³⁰ Goldensohn (2003), 7. The image of soldier as victim is, of course, an oversimplified formulation, as Tal (1996) argued with vehemence: 'Soldiers, though subordinate to their military superiors and frequently at the mercy of their enemies, still possess a life-or-death power over other people. [...] Much recent literature – popular, clinical, and academic – places the soldier simply in the victim's role; helpless in the face of war, and then helpless to readjust from the war experience upon his return home. Feminist critics should be quick to voice their disapproval of an interpretation so drastically at odds with reality. The soldier in combat is both victim and victimizer; dealing pain as well as receiving and experiencing it' (138-9).

³¹ Goldensohn (2003), 14-15.

at war, Ares and Aphrodite in bed are victims of an outside force, caught in Hephaestus' net, mocked by his supporters and unable to extricate themselves without his authority. The unsettling vulnerability of the divine lovers in the story seems lost on the human audience in the *Odyssey* (Odysseus and the Phoenicians hear the tale with uncomplicated enjoyment), but for Bishop, this disturbing facet of the tale (the lovers' naked exposure to broad daylight and ridicule) becomes a visceral representation of a disturbing facet of wartime military service – soldiers' helpless exposure to death by their leaders.

Bishop's use of a narrative digression from the *Odyssey* as the imagistic framework for his modern episode recalls another impulse of vulnerable soldiers: the desire to forget their wartime captivity momentarily, for instance for an afternoon in bed with an unfamiliar woman. Like Odysseus briefly escaping from his own past and future trials into the world of Demodocus' story, Bishop's soldier achieves a temporary respite from the sorrowful truths of war in the diverting bedroom of his lover. This desire for escape – for an episodic diversion from the narrative of wartime – is a widely recognised phenomenon among soldiers in combat, and is most often satisfied by sex of various descriptions.³² For some, simple physical release is sufficient; for others, the liaisons take on an emotional dimension and can become 'indescribably poignant'.³³ In his memoir of World War II, J. Glenn Gray describes this sentimental type of wartime sex:

Physical need might well be a basis of this love, and sensuous excitement its very breath, but its sweetness and beauty make it memorable and worthy. [...] The brevity and often stolen character of the love [between a soldier and a local girl in a war zone] gave every incident a special imprint on the memory. Those tingling guarded memories of tenderness and beauty were frequently sufficient to preserve the courage of a soldier and strengthen him for the return to battle. To have a yielding, caressing girl in his arms after hideous or nondescript days and nights in battle was to have impossibly much when he had got used to so little. [...] A love like this has for relatively uncorrupted natures a wonderfully beneficent effect as a counterpoise to the impersonal slaughter around them.³⁴

³² See Gray (1959), 59-95, on the different versions of sexuality and love that develop during combat. Regarding soldiers' preoccupation with love and sex of whatever sort, Gray wrote: 'Anyone entering military service for the first time can only be astonished by soldiers' concentration upon the subject of women and, more especially, upon the sexual act. [...] If we are honest, most of us who were civilian soldiers in recent wars will confess that we spent incomparably more time in the service of Eros during our military careers than ever before or again in our lives' (61).

³³ Gray (1959), 71.

³⁴ Gray (1959), 71-2.

The romantic quality that the encounter assumes for the soldier in Bishop's poem is evident in his beseeching question to his lover ('Do you like love?'), and in his idealised perception of the woman:

Suddenly she
left her dress and her feet were on the floor.
It seemed her body had been burned
by blue Italian ponds
and moving kept such equipoise as though
she had learned of old bronze
bright breast and the thigh like a boy's.

Furthermore, these lines reveal a poetic deepening of the escapist urge, by means of generic digression within the narrative digression. Bishop's phrase 'the thigh like a boy's' can be read as a quotation from Ovid's *Amores* (*quam iuvenale femur*, 1.5.22), a quintessential Latin love elegy. Although the occasional inclusion of elements from other genres is characteristic of epic,³⁵ Bishop's quotation from Ovid in the midst of his 'Homeric' episode seems to be especially pointed, a means not of further demonstrating his affiliation with epic, but instead of distancing himself even farther from the war. This tale of a soldier's afternoon liaison is now removed from the front by three layered choices: first, the *Odyssey* is the source of the poem's main allusion (not the *Iliad*, the Homeric epic in which war is more immediate); secondly, a diversionary episode is the central subject of this poem (not main narrative); and now, Roman love elegy interjects into the epic (i.e. martial) context – all of which poetic gestures serve to enact the wartime soldier's profound aversion to combat.

Bishop's choice of *which* epic digression to allude to is also significant. By linking his tender sexual encounter to a Homeric myth, the poet expresses and memorialises the 'special imprint on the memory' that the liaison (and others like it, 'their nights' spent collectively in the company of 'her warmth') achieves in the mind of the soldier, transforming the experience into a sacred and mythical event. Through the comparison, the wartime lovers become greater and more memorable than they are, not just a lonely soldier and a stranger in a hotel (or brothel), but an immortal god entwined in bliss with a goddess, and celebrated in

³⁵ The 'generic polyphony' of the *Aeneid*, for example, is well-attested (Hardie (1998), 57). See Harrison (2007), Chapter 7, on the functioning of 'guest' genres like tragedy, love elegy, lyric, epigram and other hexameter forms within Virgil's epic.

epic. That the characters in Bishop's chosen myth are gods not mortals perhaps highlights the 'endinglessness' of war,³⁶ the documented wartime sensation of living forever in an eternal present.³⁷ That the deities are Ares (god of War) and Aphrodite (goddess of Love) is, furthermore, no coincidence: love and war are conflicting but coexisting desires,³⁸ and by likening his story of sex in World War I to a famous myth of Olympian communion, Bishop finds a model for the tenuous resolution between love and war, a mythological explanation for the strange compulsion – especially confusing and pronounced at wartime – to seek love (Aphrodite) while embodying violence (Ares).³⁹

William Meredith: Traumatized Simile

Another poetic convention that twentieth-century American veterans borrowed from Homer and Virgil to facilitate the communication of their combat experience is the epic simile.⁴⁰ Like narrative digression for Bishop, similes in poems by World War II veteran William Meredith can be read both as an analogue for the emotional and perceptual transformations that occur in and after combat, and also as a device for recreating those wartime sensations in poetry. Meredith used the device to depict his experience of returning

³⁶ McLoughlin (2011), 107. See also McLoughlin (2011), 111: 'Paul Fussell points out that, in the First World War, "one did not have to be a lunatic or a particularly despondent visionary to conceive quite seriously that the war would literally never end and would become the permanent condition of mankind"' (Fussell (2000), 71).

³⁷ See McLoughlin (2011), 107-34 on the complex qualities of time at war. She claims that 'one of the challenges for war representation is [...] to communicate and even exploit the peculiarities of this extraordinary temporal state' – a challenge that Bishop perhaps overcomes in part by likening his soldier to a timeless god.

³⁸ On the contrasts and likenesses between love and war, see Gray (1959), 59-95, and Tatum (2003), 108, 115.

³⁹ The choice may even be openly pacifist, since Homer's tale of Ares and Aphrodite has a political afterlife, for instance serving in the proem to Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (1.29-40) as an allegory for peace prevailing permanently over war, in the Roman state.

⁴⁰ Another war poem focused around Homeric simile is Anthony Hecht 'Poppy'. Epic simile also appears in poems (though not war poems) by Howard Nemerov 'Runes'; Thomas Merton 'A Song'; Mark Van Doren 'Achilles'; Carl Dennis 'Hector's Return', 'School Days' and 'On the Way to School'; and Rosanna Warren 'Arrival' and 'Simile'.

from World War II, after serving as a naval pilot based in the Aleutian Islands and Hawaii.⁴¹ In his poem ‘Homeric Simile’,⁴² he likens the painstaking performance of a string quartet to a wartime bombing mission. The poem is lengthy, but the main elements of the simile (‘as when...not otherwise’)⁴³ can be distilled from the first and last lines:

As when a heavy bomber in the cloud
 Having made some minutes good an unknown track
 [...]
 And the searchlights through smoke tumble up
 To a lovely apex on some undone friend;
 As in this fierce discovery is something found
 More than release from waiting or of bombs,
 Greater than all the Germanies of hate,
 Some penetration of the overcast
 We make through, hour upon uncounted hour,
 All this life, fuel low, instruments all tumbled
 And unscrewed.

Not otherwise the closing notes disclose,
 As the calm, intelligent strings do their duty,
 The hard objective of a quartet, reached
 After uncertain passage, through form observed,
 And at a risk no particle diminished.

For Meredith’s pilot-narrator, what should be a peacetime pleasure instead recalls the stresses of war. The narrator perceives, in the careful effort (‘duty’) of classical musicians making their way (‘uncertain passage’) through a difficult piece of music (‘hard objective’), the meticulous calibrations and uncertain outcome of a treacherous flight. In a later revision,⁴⁴ Meredith cuts out the string quartet as the resolution of the simile, and instead ends with earlier lines from above. Here is the new arc of the poem:

As when a heavy bomber in the cloud
 [...]
 As in this fierce discovery is something found
 More than release from waiting or of bombs,
 Greater than all the Germanies of hate,
 Some penetration of the overcast
 We make through, hour upon uncounted hour,

⁴¹ William Meredith (1919-2007) was educated at Princeton University (where he later taught), before enlisting in the U.S. Navy. He reenlisted in the Korean War, and toward the end of his life served as U.S. Poet Laureate. For further biography, see Shapiro (2003), 234, and Vaughan (2009), 65-81.

⁴² Meredith (1948), 18.

⁴³ Although I have not been able to obtain exact details of Meredith’s formal classical schooling, his choice of phrase for concluding this simile (‘not otherwise’) suggests that he was, in fact, more familiar with Virgil than with Homer, as many mid-century American schoolboys-turned-poets would have been. Despite the title of the poem (‘Homeric Simile’), no Greek equivalent for the words ‘not otherwise’ appears in Homer, that I can find; but the phrase has an exact correspondence in Latin (*haud secus*), and arises repeatedly in the *Aeneid* (e.g. 2.383, 3.236, 4.447, 8.414, 11.456 and 814 and 12.9 and 124).

⁴⁴ ‘Simile’ in Meredith (1987), 17. These two poems appear to be the poet’s only responses to epic.

All this life, fuel low, instruments all tumbled,
And unscrewed.

In its revised form, the poem likens the panicked experience of a fighter pilot on a mission to the experience of ‘all this life’. Although the turning point of the comparison is no longer stated explicitly (the phrase ‘not otherwise’ has been removed with the string quartet), a shift can be understood between ‘Germanies of hate’ and ‘Some penetration’, so that the new resolution implicitly reads:

[Thus] some penetration of the overcast
We make through, hour upon uncounted hour,
All this life, fuel low, instruments all tumbled,
And unscrewed.

In other words, just as a ‘heavy bomber in a cloud’ struggles to prevail despite inclement weather, fuel shortage, instrument failure and the death of companions, not otherwise does a person making his way through ‘all this life’ fight to resist set-backs and eventually achieve ‘some penetration of the overcast’, some brief happiness or moment of understanding.

Meredith’s poetic equations of peacetime settings with wartime memories, reflect an actual phenomenon of shifts in meaning caused by combat experience. In translating trauma into language (poetry, conversation), veterans often face an unexpected dilemma:

Traumatic experience catalyzes a transformation of meaning in the signs individuals use to represent their experiences. Words such as *blood*, *terror*, *agony* and *madness* gain new meaning, within the context of the trauma, and survivors emerge from the traumatic environment with a new set of definitions. On the surface, language appears unchanged – survivors still use the word *terror*, non-traumatized audiences read and understand the word *terror*, and the dislocation of meaning is invisible until one pays attention to the cry of survivors, ‘What can we do to share our visions? Our words can only evoke the incomprehensible. Hunger, thirst, fear, humiliation, waiting, death; for us these words hold different realities. This is the ultimate tragedy of the victims’.⁴⁵

The carefulness of a string quartet is not an imagistic ‘sign’ that leads most (i.e. non-traumatized) audiences along a chain of possible ‘signifieds’ to a vivid picture of a bombing mission; however, this perception of incongruous unity between disparate scenes does sometimes result for veterans after war trauma – a real-life sensation that is here enacted in

⁴⁵ Tal (1996), 16, quoting Elie Wiesel (1990) ‘To Believe or Not to Believe’ *From the Kingdom of Memory*. New York: Summit, 33.

the poetic device of epic simile,⁴⁶ and thus made subtly accessible for readers without firsthand experience of war.

Doug Anderson: Katabasis as a Soldier's Nightmare

As a final example of a veteran war poet finding, in a poetic device from epic, both a parallel for a wartime experience and a means of conveying that experience in verse, consider Doug Anderson, who served for two years in Vietnam as a medical corpsman with a Marine battalion, and has written an award-winning collection of poetry about his combat years, *The Moon Reflected Fire*.⁴⁷ One section of his volume comprises poems that Anderson calls 'Raids on Homer', most of which are interpolated scenes giving voice to Homeric characters that are overlooked or misunderstood in the original epics.⁴⁸ The most unusual of these receptions, however, employs the epic convention of *katabasis* (a descent to the underworld

⁴⁶ Tatum (2003) depicts war as simile come to life: 'We imagine that [artistic simile] is a unity of opposites that can happen only in a work of art, and then war makes us see these contrary elements all about us, even in peacetime' (46).

⁴⁷ Doug Anderson (1943-) graduated with a master's degree from the University of Arizona, and teaches poetry and creative writing at various institutions in the northeast United States. For further biography, see Goldensohn (2006), 287.

⁴⁸ Anderson (1994) complicates and darkens Homer's characterisation of main characters in his poems 'The War' (Paris and Helen), 'Descent' (Achilles) and 'Homecoming' (Telemachus). He explores the Trojan War experiences of Homer's marginalised characters in his poems 'A Bar in Argos' (Greek foot soldier invading Troy), 'Homer Does Not Mention Him' (Greek foot soldier returning to Argos after the war), 'First Blood' (homesick Greek soldier) and 'Spoken by the Sentry at Achilles's Tent' (Greek sentry lovesick for Briseis). On these 'additions to the record', see Goldensohn (2003), 334-40. Although these are all war poems more importantly than any other classification, they do also relate to the reception mode treated in Chapter 5 of this thesis, 'Epic Revision: Feminist Versions of the *Odyssey*'.

by a living hero) to grapple with memories of the war dead.⁴⁹ The poem ‘Erebus’⁵⁰ (the title perhaps a reference to *Od.* 10.528 or 11.37)⁵¹ begins as a dream:

You have the dream again: monsoon season, jungle,
a muddy village road; you are naked,
stumbling along a paddy dike across an open field
toward the village where C.W. killed all the pigs (lines 1-4)⁵²

The second-person narration serves hypnotically to draw the reader in, to make it her dream too. The ‘muddy village road’ soon reveals itself to be the path to the underworld:

and when you enter the village, ashamed,
you see men you tagged dead
and choppered out like sides of beef,
grinning at you from around a fire,
and the old women, the children
who didn’t move quick enough, all the Cong,
they are there too,
and the ones from the day so many died
you tore up your own clothes for bandages;
all there and singing, lit amber by the fire. (lines 15-24)

Like Odysseus, this narrator encounters first a group of shades of all ages (cf. *Od.* 11.36-43), and then a series of individuals whom he knew in life, comrades now dead (cf. Odysseus’ reunions with Agamemnon, Achilles and Ajax, *Od.* 11.385-567). Unlike the epic hero, who was not present at the deaths of his peers, the narrator of Anderson’s poem witnessed – and seems even to have been involved in (as a trauma medic, like the poet himself) – the last moments of the men whose ghosts he now encounters:

Reese with the white eyebrows
traps a poncho around your shoulders,
tells you what it was like when he was dying,
treeline crackling with machinegun fire
you pounding on his chest to start his heart
and him thinking, *Easy, it’s so quiet where I am,*
quiet and fine, and Ballard,
blue black and thick-shouldered, telling you
he watched you working on his body from above,
how you were white and sweat-soaked,
your chest heaving, trying to find the exit wound
and keep from being hit

⁴⁹ Other poems (though not all war poems) from my catalogue that include a *katabasis* are: Archibald MacLeish ‘1933’; Howard Gregory ‘Haunted Odysseus’ and ‘Homage to Circe’; Donald Davidson ‘Old Sailor’s Choice’; Howard Nemerov ‘A Fable of War’; James Merrill *The Changing Light at Sandover*; Allen Grossman ‘The Life and Death Kisses’; Alan Shapiro ‘Virgil’s Descent’ and ‘Lethe’; and Rosanna Warren ‘Poetry Reading’.

⁵⁰ Anderson (1994), 44.

⁵¹ Comparisons could also be made to *Aen.* 6, but I chose to focus instead on *Od.* 11, since Anderson has identified his poem as a ‘Raid on Homer’ in particular.

⁵² Cf. Odysseus sacrificing sheep to gain access to the underworld (*Od.* 11.23-50).

and how he wanted to tell you it was all right,
it was fine (lines 32-45)

Odysseus descends to the underworld seeking a prophecy to aid his homecoming (*Od.* 90-149). Anderson's character is in need of guidance too ('over twenty years [have passed] since you got lost coming home'), though perhaps the help he seeks is psychological, rather than logistical. This veteran seems 'lost' emotionally, stuck among his wartime comrades, haunted by nightmares of combat deaths. He descends to the dead (in a dream, in a poem) seeking solace, reassurance from his dead friends that he is not to blame for their deaths, that he did not fail them by failing to save them. He dreams that the shade of his comrade Ballard 'want[s] to tell you it was all right,/ it was fine', an insight that could ease the veteran's return to normal life, a modern equivalent to an epic prophecy.

Anderson's decision to figure his *katabasis* as a dream has two effects. First of all, it identifies an ancient poetic analogue for the real but surreal sensation, often reported by soldiers and veterans, of 'being already dead' despite having survived a war.⁵³ Anderson's narrator 'sit[s] down with the dead' when he arrives in the underworld, and at the end of the poem is welcomed to remain there by a dead comrade:

*All of us are here, he says, sit down,
we'll get you some clothes,
you're home now, easy,
remember what you used to say?
You're going to be fine, my man,
you're going home,
just don't fade out on me,
hey, what's your mother's maiden name?* (lines 51-8)

This ghost comforts the narrator about his arrival in the underworld, using words with which the medic once reassured his dying comrades. He is now one of them, 'home' among the dead. Jonathan Shay observed of this phenomenon:

'I died in Vietnam' is a common utterance of our patients. Most viewed themselves as already dead at some point in their combat service, often after a close friend was killed. [...] The sense of being already dead may [...] be the prototype for the loss of all emotion that defines for combat post-traumatic stress disorder the prolonged states of numbness following their service.⁵⁴

⁵³ Shay (1994), 51-3.

⁵⁴ Shay (1994), 51, 53.

Second, and conversely, Anderson's image of *katabasis* as a veteran's nightmare reads ancient epic through the lens of a modern soldier's reality, suggesting that the mythical descent to the underworld in the *Odyssey* (and *Aeneid*) might seem, to a twentieth-century veteran wracked by grief, like the tortured projection of an ancient war veteran, haunted by the loss of his friends and family. Shay attested that traumatised soldiers often lose 'authority over memory' after a war, which can result in recurring nightmares of fragmented, disturbing imagery, like that described in Anderson's dream – or, as he implicitly invites us to imagine, in *Odyssey* 11.⁵⁵ Odysseus experienced vicious combat in the Trojan War, and his reunion with the ghosts of his lost loved ones in the underworld is not unlike the abstract and involuntary *katabasis* sensations from which modern veterans suffer. Consider the hero attempting to embrace his mother's shade:

αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γ' ἔθελον φρεσὶ μερμηρίζας
μητρὸς ἐμῆς ψυχὴν ἐλέειν κατατεθνηυῖης.
τρὶς μὲν ἐφωρμήθην, ἐλέειν τέ με θυμὸς ἀνώγει,
τρὶς δέ μοι ἐκ χειρῶν σκιῇ εἴκελον ἦ καὶ ὄνειρῳ
ἔπτατ'. ἐμοὶ δ' ἄχος ὄξυ γενέσκετο κηρόθι μᾶλλον (*Od.* 11.204-8)

My mind was torn, but I wanted to embrace the spirit of my dead mother. Three times I reached for her, with my heart eager to embrace her, and three times she slipped out of my arms like a shadow or a dream. Each time the grief grew sharper in my heart.

Of course Anticleia is a ghost, and thus immaterial (as she explains at *Od.* 11.215-224), but the experience of striving to reunite with a dead person is 'like a dream' for Odysseus – like a soldier's nightmare.

As a brief addendum to the main arc of the chapter, I will add that this construal of the hero of the *Odyssey* as a damaged veteran haunted by his lost comrades is made explicit by World War II pilot John Ciardi, in his poem 'Ulysses', which adds a scene to the Homeric text, in which the wandering soldier admits to emotional damage, disconnection from reality and preoccupation with the dead following the war. The long narrative poem concludes:

I returned to the sea, and at the last mountain
I stood to remember, and the memory
could not live in the fact. I had grown old
in the wrong world. Penelope wove for nothing
her fabric and delay. I could not return.
I was woven to my dead men. In the dust

⁵⁵ Shay (1994), 166, 172.

of the dead shore by the dead sea I lay down
and named their names who had matched lives with me,
and won. And they were all I loved.

Odysseus cannot ‘live in the fact’, nor ‘return’ to his past reality in Ithaca. Instead, although still living, he is ‘woven to [his] dead men’, and lies down ‘in the dust/ of the dead shore by the dead sea’, essentially stretched out horizontally like his dead companions. The lines recall Shay’s description of veterans’ obsession with the conditions of wartime, even after a war has concluded, and detachment from peacetime life:

So long as the traumatic moment persists as a relivable nightmare, consciousness remains fixed upon it. The experiential quality of reality drains from the here-and-now; the dead are more real than the living. This is a cognitive aspect of the detachment of the trauma survivor from his current life and is intimately connected with the persistence of numbing, one of the basic skills of surviving prolonged, inescapable terror.⁵⁶

In Ciardi’s poem, Odysseus is numb to Penelope and his future at home (‘the fact’), caught up instead in the false reality of ‘memory’, ‘the wrong world’ and his comrades who have ‘won’ by dying first. Receptions like Anderson’s (and Ciardi’s), which explore the overlapping qualities of epic *katabasis* and modern post-traumatic stress disorder, unlock for civilian readers the associations and possibilities in the Homeric text that a war veteran might notice, and thus recreate in poetry one way in which battle trauma distorts perception, the sensation of re-experiencing a familiar text with the strange new insight gained in, or irrevocably grafted onto a soldier’s awareness by, combat.

The mechanics of reduction operate in a very precise way in the epic receptions of this chapter. These poets ‘reduce’ Homer and Virgil by isolating and excerpting single poetic devices from the long texts, and they do so above all because of the unique interplay of perception and representation between veteran poets and their epic sources. Bishop, Meredith and Anderson discover one-to-one correspondences between epic conventions and real-life war experiences: a tryst is like a narrative digression (Bishop); memory is like a simile (Meredith); and a dream is like a journey to the underworld (Anderson). Because of the uncanny, fertile relevance of these analogies, the poets use the poetic devices in new work, to represent their elusive and painful experiences of military conflict, a goal for which it is

⁵⁶ Shay (1994), 172.

expedient simply to single out and adapt each element on its own, rather than engage with epic as a whole. These poems are powerfully dialectical in genre, diving fully into the most intense lyric depths of a moment in time within a traumatised consciousness, and simultaneously grasping in famous and resurrected epic ways, for understanding among modern audiences of the profound psychological scars of war.

4. Epic Comparison: Defining America in Modern Political Receptions

In the last chapter on modern American war poetry, short receptions of ancient epic were seen to concentrate on textual details, lifting and reworking specific literary features from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* (narrative digression, simile, katabasis) to achieve poetic success, by recreating or giving a degree of access to the dauntingly strange experiences of warfare. American political poetry of the past century, by contrast, engages with aspects of Homer and Virgil in new versions as ideas more than texts, using the epics as a source of broadly accessible symbols of the individuals, governments and customs of the classical past, against which to situate and define the realities of the American present.

In introducing the poems that form the subject of this chapter, I quote the introduction to Michael Thurston's study of American political verse: 'While all poetry might, under various contemporary theoretical rubrics, be seen as somehow political, the objects of scrutiny in this study are politically engaged in immediate, instrumental, even activist ways'.¹ By definition, such openly 'political' poetry is concerned with evaluating the existing establishment;² but the efficacy of such poetic assessments has long been a matter of debate, even among poets themselves. From one perspective (and in Auden's now-ubiquitous phrase), 'poetry makes nothing happen', and so attempts to enact actual change through poetic means are at best futile, and at worst a misuse of the art. This view held particular sway in mid-twentieth century America, a period in which New Criticism had so infiltrated literary culture that political poetry was widely dismissed as 'bad', 'sentimental' and a 'failure' on

¹ Thurston (2001), 13.

² Hammer (2003) offers a simple but useful definition of politics, defining it 'neither as a structure nor as a function but as an activity. The activity of politics constitutes [...] the political field, a realm in which questions of community organization are raised, determined, and implemented' (14). Political poems, then, engage in this 'political field', commenting not only 'narrowly [...] on a certain issue' but also 'on the system itself' (Dowdy (2007), 10). 'They are [...] struggles carried into the public arena, actions themselves put into print, onto record, and into performance' (11).

both activist and aesthetic fronts.³ The poet Allen Tate denounced the mixing of politics and poetry vehemently, in his essay ‘To Whom is the Poet Responsible?’: ‘Were we confronted with an unreal choice, it would be better to suppress poetry than to misuse it, to expect of it an order of action that it cannot provide’.⁴

From another angle, poetry is understood as wielding a certain power in the world beyond the page. In history, there have been occasional political outcomes for which poetry is a traceable cause. Alexander the Great, for example, is known to have slept with a copy of the *Iliad* under his pillow, and ‘made the exploits of Achilles at Troy a model for the conquests carried out by his own armies’.⁵ According to Plutarch, he even visited Troy and paid his respects at the tomb of Achilles, before embarking on his own campaign in Persia and Asia.⁶ Alexander’s example, of claiming descent from the Trojan hero, arguably sparked a ‘chain of political imitations’ in the ancient world, ‘drawing at its outset on the aesthetic power of the Homeric epics to fuel ambitions of political power’, and ultimately ‘produc[ing] a Xerxes, an Alexander, a Caesar, and Caesarism’ – leaders imitating their predecessors imitating Homer.⁷

More often, though, the impact of poetry is oblique or immeasurable. Even so, many modern poets are convinced that it plays an essential role in affecting human life, in ‘making something happen’, however subtle or untold. Archibald MacLeish claimed that poetry could provide invaluable awareness about the world as it is, from which change can arise, the poem acting as a pivot point in individual or collective history:

Granted that poetry is [...] an instrument of knowledge [...], doesn’t it follow that poetry *does* make things happen – that it is one of the ways things are brought to happen in the world, to bring a living generation to a knowledge of its situation, a knowledge of its dangers, a knowledge of its hopes, of its aspirations, a knowledge of what the world really is in all its potentialities? [...] [Through poetry,] you *come* to know what you already know, to know it alive in the heart instead of knowing it up here dead in the head. It’s the difference between reverie and action. [T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*] produced something rather like the wall at

³ Thurston (2001), citing C. Brooks and R.P. Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1939), the textbook that made New Criticism ‘the dominant model of poetic pedagogy in the postwar United States’ (7). Thurston summarises the influential viewpoint of the New Critics: ‘[According to them,] political poetry mistakes its mission; it diverts from the expected and sanctioned track and refuses to remain aloof, concerned only with irony and internal coherence. It tries to make something happen’ (8).

⁴ Tate (1951), 326.

⁵ Quint (1993), 4. Cf. Fox (2004) on the life of Alexander the Great, with references to Homer.

⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 15, quoted in Quint (1993), 4.

⁷ Quint (1993), 8.

the end of a pool against which the swimmer kicks off before he heads in the opposite direction.⁸

Denise Levertov, ‘one of the United States’ most controversial and outspoken political poets during the Vietnam War’, was convinced ‘that poetry can “indirectly” affect the course of events by “awakening pity, terror, compassion and the conscience of a leader” and by “strengthening the morale of persons working for a common cause”’.⁹ Seamus Heaney, a famous recent proponent of the usefulness of poetry (‘poetry’s instrumentality in adjusting and correcting the world’s imbalances’),¹⁰ claimed for the art the ability ‘to place a counter-reality in the scales, a reality which is admittedly only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual. This redress of poetry comes from its being a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances’.¹¹ In his view, a poem need not be consciously, explicitly or forcefully ‘political’ in its conception, to effect important change:

In considering poetry’s possible service to programmes of cultural and political realignment [...], I don’t want to give the impression that its force must always be exercised in earnest, morally premeditated ways. On the contrary, I want to profess the surprise of poetry as well as its reliability, its given, unforeseeable thereness, the way it enters our field of vision and animates our physical and intelligent being in much the same way as those bird-shapes painted on the transparent surfaces of glass walls or glass doors and windows must suddenly cross the line of a real bird’s flight. In a flash those shapes register and transmit their unmistakable presence so the birds then veer off instinctively and thereby avoid collision with the glass.¹²

The poems discussed in this chapter are examples of these bird-forms on the glass, attempts by modern American poets to apprehend their readers in mid-flight, to reveal the world to them and to steer them toward a better reality. As Heaney’s words remind us, politically engaged poets can run a gamut, from vigorously activist, through civic-minded and accessible, to private and reflective; and three famous American poets who represent these points on the spectrum have all turned to Homer and Virgil in substantial poems of political

⁸ Bush (1964), 89, 92. MacLeish suggested that successful rhetoric, that which succeeds in effecting change, is actually poetic in nature. Citing the example of Abraham Lincoln’s 1862 State of the Union speech, he speculates that ‘the effectiveness of a great political statement [might depend on its] achiev[ing] in its metaphor, its imagery, its rhythm, the quality of poetry’, and reasons: ‘Doesn’t rhetoric, then, only make things happen when it has the quality of poetry?’ (95).

⁹ Dowdy (2007), quoting from R. Jones (ed.) (1985) *Poetry and Politics*, 174.

¹⁰ Heaney (1990), 7.

¹¹ Heaney (1990), 4.

¹² Heaney (1990), 18-19.

expression: Archibald MacLeish in ‘1933’ (1933), a rewriting of Elpenor’s speech to Odysseus in the underworld as a hopeful projection of American destiny; Allen Tate in ‘Aeneas at Washington’ (1933), an imagined scene of Aeneas on the banks of the Potomac River, mourning the degeneration of American society; and Robert Pinsky in ‘An Explanation of America’ (1979), an open letter to his daughter, likening the American individual to Odysseus, whose wandering journey through diverse lands resulted in a successful homecoming.

My approach in these pages in particular is ‘an historically informed formalist criticism’,¹³ and these three pieces are chosen to be usefully representative of twentieth-century political receptions of epic: the poems span the century; exhibit a variety of lengths (short, medium, long); present both conservative (Tate) and liberal views (MacLeish, Pinsky); and, above all, clearly illustrate a defining aspect of the modern poetic reception of ancient epic – the use of symbols from Homer and Virgil as points of comparison against which to explore and define the idea of modern America.¹⁴ (In addition, I happen to consider that the three poems discussed in this chapter possess considerable aesthetic interest, and, because of their dated or unfashionable political perspectives, have perhaps been unduly overlooked by recent readers. As Harold Bloom suggests, ‘literary criticism [...] ought to consist of acts of appreciation’,¹⁵ and to a small degree the close readings in this thesis fulfil that directive.)

¹³ Hoffman (2001), 1, quoting James Breslin (without further citation).

¹⁴ Other political poems of epic reception that seek to define America by comparison to the Homeric and Virgilian worlds include, Donald Davidson’s ‘Old Sailor’s Choice’ (from *Poems 1922-1961*), in which the ills of industrialised America are presented as the perils of a modern Odysseus’ journey; Charles Martin’s ‘Dido and Aeneas’ (1984), in which the poet suggests that America, like Rome, is doomed to fall; and Alan Dugan’s ‘On Lines 69-70, Book IV, of Virgil’s *Aeneid*’ (1963), ‘Stentor and Mourning’ (1972) and ‘Speech for Aeneas’ (1983), all of which depict an ironic America, deluded in its sense of its own exceptionalism.

¹⁵ Bloom (2011), x.

It is predictable that American poets of the twentieth century should refer to ancient epic in their poems of political commentary, because epic is traditionally a political genre. With the *Aeneid*, Virgil introduced political concerns into the epic form definitively, by using the myth of Aeneas to represent the origins and future of Augustan rule in Rome, an act that ‘decisively transformed epic for posterity into [...] a genre that was overtly political’.¹⁶ The *Aeneid* became the origin point and model (or anti-model) for a long tradition of literary epic in the West, with many later works taking ‘political issues as central subjects, whether they perpetuated the imperial politics of the *Aeneid* or, as in the case of [Lucan’s] *Pharsalia* [and its descendents], sought to attack and resist empire’.¹⁷ Since poetic forms become ‘encrusted’ with meanings ‘from a repeated and therefore deeply ingrained association’ between certain forms and certain subjects, the political genre of epic may have struck twentieth-century U.S. poets as an obvious and alluringly authoritative poetic form to harness, in communicating modern ideologies.¹⁸

The epics of Homer and Virgil have a specifically American association as well, since the story of Aeneas – a Trojan hero re-establishing his fallen city in Rome – has served as an analogue for the American experience from the country’s earliest history, even pre-history. In introducing a public programme hosted in 1987 in Washington, D.C., by the Vergilian Society of America, Susan Ford Wiltshire explained the connection:

Like Rome, Washington was built on a river inland from the sea by immigrants from abroad who sought to found a ‘new order’ in a new land to the West. As early as the English discovery chronicles comparing Captain John Smith with Aeneas and Powhatan with Turnus, Vergil has had a special purchase on the American imagination.¹⁹

¹⁶ Quint (1993), 8. On the politics of the *Aeneid*, see e.g. Woodman & West (1984), chapters 4 and 5; Cairns (1989); Williams (1990); Stahl (1998); Adler (2003); Armstrong (2006) and Reed (2007).

¹⁷ Quint (1993), 8.

¹⁸ Thurston (2001), 27. Even the Homeric epics, which do not engage with historical, contemporaneous politics as the *Aeneid* does, can be read and appropriated retrospectively (through the lens of the genre as Virgil shaped it) as possessing a political dimension. As Hammer (2003) proposes in his book *The Iliad as Politics*, ‘the social drama portrayed in the *Iliad* draws attention to fundamental questions of community organization’ (13).

¹⁹ Wiltshire in Rowland (1987), 1.

Even more important to the settlers than these logistical parallels between the foundation myths ('seeing the New World in terms of Aeneas's perilous sea voyage to discover the land to the west'),²⁰ were the values they felt they cherished in common with the Trojan leader: '*fatum*, a sense of mission; *pietas*, duty toward family, country, and the land; *memoria* and the preservation of the sacred; self-discipline; belief in a divine order expressing itself obscurely in history'.²¹ In a way, early Americans may not have recognised their own values reflected in Virgil so much as adopted the values from his world as their own.²² Educated formally in the study of Latin and Greek antiquity, and faced with the daunting task 'of inventing themselves' in a revolutionary new nation, the American founders used the long-admired civilization of the *Aeneid* as a source of 'precedents for the making and measure of [their] civility'.²³ Of course they drew on numerous ancient texts for this purpose, including history, philosophy and diverse poetry (since classical literature in general was believed to 'teach [...] universal truths about human nature and [to] represent the foundation of a Western civilization to which America is an heir';²⁴ and since it formed 'the backbone' of the school and college curricula in colonial America, and was thus widely familiar).²⁵ But 'the exemplary power' of ancient epic, and in particular the societies portrayed by Homer and Virgil (perhaps because the Aeneas myth is the product of both authors), appear to have enjoyed a unique prominence in early American discourse.²⁶

Statesmen, for example, invoked both Homer and Virgil in their debates, conversation, correspondence and private writing, as a source of metaphors for American

²⁰ Shields (2001), xxv.

²¹ Cowan in Rowland (1987), 40.

²² So it is possible that, as Bloom (2011) observes of Shakespeare, 'the world he made made us' (29).

²³ Wiltshire in Rowland (1987), 2. As Richard (1994) explained, the American founders were relatively new to educated refinement: 'Of the ninety-nine men who signed the Declaration of Independence or were members of the Constitutional Convention, only eight are known to have had fathers who attended college. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin did not attend college at all' (50). So these men, worried about being scorned as 'upstarts', eagerly employed classical symbols and allusions to secure social status, both among their American colleagues and in the eyes of European rulers and diplomats. In Richard's words: 'The American plethora of classical allusions betrayed a hint of defensiveness' (51).

²⁴ Meckler (2006), 4-5.

²⁵ Shields (2001), xli.

²⁶ Phrase from Meckler (2006), 8.

self-conception. For instance, in a letter to his colleague Joseph Galloway in 1775, Benjamin Franklin ‘lambasted Britain’, using an image from Virgil to illustrate his point:

When I consider the extream Corruption prevalent among the Order of Men in this old rotten State, and the glorious publick Virtue so predominant in our rising Country, I cannot but apprehend more Mischief than Benefit from a closer Union. [...] To unite us will only be to corrupt and poison us also. It seems like Mezentius coupling and binding together the dead and the living. ‘Truly torture: as they floated in the poisonous, putrid blood in vile embrace, he slew them with a lingering death’.²⁷

In 1794, reacting in a public pamphlet to a massacre of Native Americans by white settlers, Franklin invoked Homer to defend the settlers’ actions:

He [Homer] frequently speaks of what he calls not only Duties, but the sacred Rites of Hospitality (exercised towards Strangers, while in our House or Territory), as including, besides all the common Circumstances of Entertainment, full Safety and Protection of Persons, from all Dangers of Life, from all Injuries, and even Insults.²⁸

In other words, because the ‘inhospitable Indians’ did not extend these civilised rites to the settlers (figured here as worthy Homeric guests, despite being invaders), the settlers broke no code in harming them. In both examples, an American founder invoked Homeric and Virgilian epic to clarify the modern American experience.

This trend continued in the nineteenth century. Future president William Henry Harrison, writing to current vice-president John C. Calhoun in 1832, reassured him about the inviolability of states’ rights: ‘If our government is to fall in that way [i.e. toward usurping powers from other bodies], the powers reserved by the States will enjoy the privilege of Ulysses in the cave of Polyphemus, “the last to be devoured”’.²⁹ Poets and philosophers also depicted and conceptualised the nation by comparison to Homer and Virgil. Writing in his journal in 1851, Henry David Thoreau used a myth from Virgil to explain the rise of America:

The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a mere fable; the founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar source. It is because the children of the empire were not suckled by wolves that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were. America is

²⁷ Quoting *Aen.* 8.487-8: *tormenti genus, et sanie taboque fluentis/ complexu in misero longa sic morte necabat*. Letter from Franklin to Galloway, 25 February 1775 (in L. Larabee (ed.) *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 21, 509), quoted in Richard (1994), 210.

²⁸ From ‘A Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County’ (1764) (in L. Larabee (ed.) *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 2, 57-8), quoted in Richard (1994), 209. For additional examples, see Richard (1994), 55, 143 and 207.

²⁹ Letter from Harrison to Calhoun, 30 April 1832 (from R.L. Meriwether (ed.) *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, Vol. 2, 578), quoted in Richard (2009), 71.

the she wolf today, and the children of exhausted Europe exposed on her uninhabited and savage shores are the Romulus and Remus who, having derived new life and vigor from her breast, have founded a new Rome in the West.³⁰

Walt Whitman asserts ‘America’s claim as the legitimate heir’ of the epic Muse, in his poem ‘Song of the Exposition’:

Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
That matter of Troy and Achilles’ wrath, and Aeneas’,
Odysseus’ wanderings.
Placard ‘Removed’ and ‘To Let’ on the rocks of your
snowy Parnassus. [...]
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide
untried domain awaits, demands you.³¹

Even in the twentieth century, despite the marked decline in classical elitism, because of the more egalitarian teaching of Classics at American universities in translation on a broad scale (and thus the reduction of the cultural capital of referring to ancient literature in politics or public-minded poetry),³² prominent Americans occasionally still invoked the proud and hopeful image of the nation as a worthy new horizon, a new Troy, a new Rome, the ancient world resurrected in the New World. Elihu Root, New York Senator and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, opposed an amendment on the Senate floor in 1911, by comparing the mistaken ‘allure’ of the proposal to the Sirens’ song in *Odyssey* 12:

As Ulysses required his followers to bind him to the mast that he might not yield to the song of the siren as he sailed by, so the American democracy has bound itself to the great rules of right conduct which are essential to the protection of liberty and justice and property and order, and made it practically impossible that the impulse, the prejudice, the excitement, the frenzy of the moment, shall carry our democracy into those excesses which have wrecked all our prototypes in history.³³

In his long poem ‘Experience the West’ (1936), John Peale Bishop likens ‘the discoverers’ of the American frontier to Aeneas fleeing Troy:

³⁰ From F.H. Allen and B. Torrey (eds) (1984) *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, Vol. 2, 151, quoted in Richard (2009), 118.

³¹ From *Leaves of Grass* (1900), quoted in Richard (2009), 118.

³² Neither Rahe (1994) nor Meckler (2006) cites a single example of Homeric or Virgilian reference in twentieth-century American politics. Meckler attributes this to a decline in formal education, arguing that ‘direction quotations from classical authors fail to convey any meaning to an audience bereft of Latin and Greek’ (5); but I think it relates more to the ‘deconsecration’ of Classics in education, which diminished their value as an elitist marker, while opening them up to value as a personal touchstone for any and all readers.

³³ From the *Congressional Record*, Sixty-first Congress, Third Session, 2260, quoted in Meckler (2006), 77-8.

They followed the course of heaven as before
Trojan in smoky armor westward fled
Disastrous walls and on his shoulders bore
A dotard recollection had made mad,

Depraved by years, Anchises: on the strong
Tall bronze upborne, small sack of impotence;
Yet still he wore the look of one who young
Had closed with Love in cloudy radiance.

So the discoverers when they wading came
From shallow ships and climbed the wooded shores:
They saw the west, a sky of falling flame,
And by the streams savage ambassadors.³⁴

Allen Tate in 'The Mediterranean' (1933) and Robert Frost in 'For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration' (1961) likewise laud the United States as the fine offspring of its epic forebears, and do so by quoting Virgil.³⁵

For the twentieth-century poets of this chapter, then, despite the fact that Classics had become increasingly informal in American education and scarce in public discourse, the link between the epic myths and the myth of America was nonetheless etched somewhere deep in the collective consciousness, taken for granted in the world in which they lived. Archibald MacLeish, Allen Tate and Robert Pinsky are not formal classicists. They first came upon Homer and Virgil in school, and returned to the stories later in their lives, mostly in translation. In a way, then, the versions of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* that they invoke in their political poems of American identity are not the original texts merely, but rather the received epics, the ideas about Homer and Virgil, Odysseus and Aeneas, Troy and Rome, that have been circulating within American civilisation, accruing American connotations and shaping American self-image since the beginning.

For all three poets discussed in the following pages, epic serves as a point of comparison, a famous origin from which to measure American progress (MacLeish), degeneration (Tate), and continuity (Pinsky). At stake in these political poems combining ancient and modern circumstances is, ultimately, the nature of history, the relation of the present to the past. For MacLeish, that relationship is one of growth and revision, in which

³⁴ Tate (1948).

³⁵ For a reading of this poem by Tate, see Ziolkowski (1993); for readings of Frost, see Ziolkowski (1993) and Harrison (2008).

America has the blessed opportunity to rewrite, correct and surpass the outcomes of the Homeric journey; for Tate, of longing and degeneration, in which America has fallen from the Virgilian ideal; and for Pinsky, of remarkable sameness despite apparent differences, in which America unites in one unlikely nation an incomparable diversity of histories and cultures. For all three, the definition of modern reality (which they all considered it a crucial responsibility of poetry to formulate) depends on its relation to the empires and characters of the epic past. Even this process – of definition by comparison – is epic. As J.D. Reed observes:

Historical epic, both Greek and Latin, is commonly concerned with defining a national self against an Oriental other, making epic poetry a place for establishing or experimenting with national identity. [...] In its long reception, Homeric poetry was taken this way; the *Iliad* suggested a template for the ‘otherness’ of the Trojan versus the Greek, and the *Odyssey* is full of cultural antitypes.³⁶

In the *Aeneid*, above all, ‘metaphor is the principal trope’ and ‘an interplay of sameness and difference [is] the engine of Virgilian meaning’.³⁷ As in the epics of Homer and Virgil, national definition in American political poetry is achieved through comparison – in this case, to the epics themselves.

Archibald MacLeish: Pushing Off Against Homer

One twentieth-century American poet who reworked ancient epic for political ends is Archibald MacLeish.³⁸ As his past student (and fellow poet) Donald Hall noted in a reflection on his late professor, MacLeish was a renowned poet and statesman from the 1930s to the 1960s, but was ‘devalued’ after that,³⁹ due (Hall suggested) mostly to the ‘derivative’

³⁶ Reed (2007), 15.

³⁷ Reed (2010), 76.

³⁸ Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982), educated at Hotchkiss, Yale, and Harvard Law School, had a brief interlude as an army captain in France during World War I, before beginning his career at a prestigious law firm in Boston. From 1923-1928, he moved to Paris, to join the Lost Generation. He later served in government in Washington under the Roosevelt administration (as Librarian of Congress and Assistant Secretary of State, among other posts), and taught as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard until his retirement in 1962. For a full, formal biography, see Donaldson (1992), and for MacLeish’s personal reflections on his life, Drabeck & Ellis (1986).

³⁹ Newcomb (1990) described the poet’s decline: ‘Between 1930 and 1945 Archibald MacLeish was one of America’s best-known and widely read poets, publishing prolifically in a great variety of poetic styles and genres. During these years MacLeish also came as close as any poet has in twentieth-century

tendencies of his work.⁴⁰ In fact, I attribute the disregard into which MacLeish has fallen to his political poetics, his conception of the aim of poetry as social good, and the obligation of his career as a poet to fulfil it, liberal beliefs that were starkly at odds with the exclusive, scholarly poetics of his contemporaries like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, whose collective acclaim as Modernists soon shouldered out, later in the century, the memory of alternative poetic perspectives from that generation. Scott Donaldson articulated this argument:

In putting his poetry at the service of a political agenda, MacLeish defied the prevailing canons of literary criticism. In the 1930s there were two competing schools of thought as to the ideal relationship between poetry and society. The still surviving supporters of genteel romanticism elevated poetry into an art that was so pure and so private it could not survive contamination with public issues. Then the high modernists, whose doctrines were rapidly gaining ascendancy, declared their alienation from ‘the tragic shoddiness’ of their own time, and tended, like Eliot, to seek direction from the traditional past. Both camps believed that fine craftsmanship and communication to a wide audience were necessarily at odds. [...] MacLeish chose not to accept this as an unbreachable division, and he has suffered for it.⁴¹

Instead, MacLeish held that a poet’s ‘one debt’ to his society was to create ‘an image of mankind in which men can again believe’,⁴² in other words, to uplift and inspire the human race about its own identity. Especially following the series of modern cataclysms that began in the early twentieth century (the loss of human dignity after industrialisation, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War and McCarthyism), the world was, in MacLeish’s strong view, in acute need of a new, reassuring public poetry to soothe its fears. Poetry could no longer cloister itself in the private sphere, but must be made accessible and heartening to a diverse audience. He observed in 1939, in his essay ‘Poetry and the Public World’:

America to being a national political figure – as Pulitzer-prize winner, political essayist and commentator, popular radio dramatist, chair of the 1937 Writers' Congress, Librarian of Congress, first director of the U.S. Office of Facts and Figures, Assistant Secretary of State, author of part of the United Nations charter, chair of the first UNESCO conference, and rumored ghostwriter of the occasional fireside chat. Now, in 1990, MacLeish hovers on the outer margins of academic canons[,] represented in most recent anthologies by a few early, uncharacteristic lyrics such as “Ars Poetica” and “You, Andrew Marvell” (9).

⁴⁰ Hall (1992), 111. Hall explained: ‘MacLeish is a derivative poet, and his imitativeness partly accounts both for his unpopularity and for his popularity. When we like a poet, we want *more*, and other poets are always ready to produce the *more* we want’ (118). He gave, as an example, MacLeish’s long poem *The Pot of Earth*, a depiction of the fragmented modern world, published to critical acclaim just three years after *The Waste Land*. Hall later admitted wryly that ‘we [fellow poets] were intolerant [of MacLeish] because he was famous, derivative, rich, popular, lucky, prolific, and diffident’ (120).

⁴¹ Donaldson (1992), 225-6.

⁴² MacLeish (1941), 58.

We live [...] in a revolutionary time in which the public life has washed over the dikes of private existence. [...] The single individual, whether he so wishes or not, has become a part of a world which contains also Austria and Czechoslovakia and China and Spain. [...] What happens in his morning paper happens in his blood all day, and Madrid, Nanking, Prague, are names as close to him as the names by which he counts his dearest losses. This we know to be true of our own knowledge.⁴³

MacLeish explained, by analogy, the comfort that poetry could offer in such traumatic times: 'Poetry is to violent emotion what [...] the [mathematical] equation is to laborious thinking – release, identity, and rest'.⁴⁴ In other words, poetry is order, and order provides stability against the terror of chaos.

For MacLeish, only poetry as 'public speech' – verse written to be accessible to all people – could rise to this obligation of solace. He defined 'public speech' at length in his autobiographical reflections:⁴⁵

It isn't a question of public or private poet. It's a question of to whom the poet is speaking and in what language. Is it a language so esoteric and private that only a few people with the requisite reading and education and taste can possibly understand it, or is it a language which is in the open air and which has open and public meanings? [...] 'Public speech' also has to do [...] with the world about which one is speaking, that is, is this again only the world of the emotions, or is it also the world of events, the world that Homer occupied? My question always is, can you exclude one or the other [...] particularly in our time? Ours is a public age. The events that concern us are wars, the dangers of wars, the dangers of growing civilizations, and the destruction of the earth – nothing private about these views, objects, problems! What has always bothered me is the constant attempt to restrict poetry – to make it 'recherché' – to make it precious – to make it rich, deep, beautiful, crystalline, and the property of about eight people who can handle it!⁴⁶

It seems that this need to address political and social concerns in simple verse was almost a moral instinct for MacLeish, a matter of pride and decency. He admitted to being motivated by conscience: 'Face to face with the Great Depression and the horrors of that time, it became perfectly apparent [to me] that you couldn't keep your self-respect and hide that way', in

⁴³ MacLeish (1941), 88. The poet was familiar with the pain caused by twentieth-century upheaval. His 'dearest loss' was his brother Kenneth, a pilot who was shot down over Belgium during World War I, an event that haunted the poet for the rest of his life. Drabeck & Ellis (1986) recalled their interview with MacLeish in his old age: 'We settled in the music room and he talked about his family and his father and his brother Kenneth, and he was close to tears as he recalled Kenneth's death in World War I more than sixty years earlier' (9).

⁴⁴ MacLeish (1941), 86.

⁴⁵ Drabeck & Ellis (1986), xi.

⁴⁶ Drabeck & Ellis (1986), 84. MacLeish (1941) cited his poetic 'predecessors in Greece and Rome', who wrote clearly about government, wars, love of all sorts, gods and death, as inspiration for this impulse: 'They were capable of the world. [...] Their poetry was public speech. It reached conclusions' (63).

writing private, privileged poetry.⁴⁷ MacLeish did not hide, and instead set about providing his troubled age with the public poetry he imagined for it.

He achieved the joint aims of his political poetics – worldliness, accessibility and reassurance in a dark period – in part by invoking ancient myth. Throughout his career, MacLeish published a number of receptions of ancient literature, writing an original full-length epic about the discovery of the New World (*Conquistador* (1932)) with a classical proem, and rewriting the *Odyssey* (in the poem ‘1933’ (1933)), *Oedipus* (in the verse play *Panic* (1935)), the story of the Trojan War (in the verse drama for radio *The Trojan Horse* (1952)) and the Hercules myth (in the stage play *Herakles* (1967)),⁴⁸ all of which works employ universally familiar myths as allegories to define America, by comparison to the ancient settings, as a hopeful new horizon, a place in which recent history will not repeat itself, but can be rewritten to steer the nation towards a safe and hopeful future.⁴⁹ All of these new versions were marked by clear signposts to the ancient point of comparison, and were composed for public performance or wide dissemination.⁵⁰

In one of his only small-scale reworkings of ancient myth, MacLeish re-imagined Elpenor’s speech to Odysseus in the underworld (*Od.* 11.60-78). His poem ‘1933’ (164 lines, renamed ‘Elpenor’ in later collections) ostensibly consists of words of advice from Odysseus’ dead comrade. However, it is also a ‘mythic political allegory’,⁵¹ in which MacLeish advises his American audience about how to maintain hope during the Great Depression, speaking through the thinly veiled voice of Elpenor guiding Odysseus on his journey. In Homer’s

⁴⁷ Drabeck & Ellis (1986), 83.

⁴⁸ For a detailed account of this play as a reception of Euripides and Seneca, see Riley (2008), 279-312.

⁴⁹ MacLeish worked from translations of the original texts, as he acknowledges in the epigraphs to his receptions of Homer (‘1933’ and *The Trojan Horse*), in which he cites T.E. Lawrence’s 1932 translation of the *Odyssey*. According to his biographer, MacLeish first read the *Odyssey* in translation in childhood, at home with his mother; encountered it a second time at Hotchkiss School, again in English (since he chose not to study Ancient Greek); and enjoyed it in translation again in 1978, late in his life, in Robert Fitzgerald’s version (Donaldson (1992), 17-18, 31, 226). Despite not reading the ancient language, the poet did identify strongly with ancient Greece: ‘Yes, [I have visited] a good many times, and you know it’s home for everybody. As Paris is a contemporary home, Greece, the islands and Athens, [...] are our sort of eternal homes’ (Drabeck & Ellis (1986), 213).

⁵⁰ For suggestions of these intentions, see, for instance, the poet’s comments in his autobiography (1986) on *Conquistador* (76), ‘1933’ (87-8), *Panic* (101-4), *The Trojan Horse* (191-3) and *Herakles* (213).

⁵¹ Newcomb (1990), 7.

version, the ghost of the sailor merely explains his cause of death (a drunken fall from the roof of Circe's house, *Od.* 11.60-5), and entreats Odysseus to find his corpse and give it fitting burial (*Od.* 11.66-78). In MacLeish's new version, the content of the entreaty is almost entirely different. The poet does frame his poem with passages related to the original text, using as an epigraph a translation of *Odyssey* 11.51-8, and giving an extended interpretation of Elpenor's request for burial (*Od.* 11.71-8) as a coda. However, the majority of '1933' is starkly new, a vividly imaginative and greatly lengthened speech of advice from Elpenor to Odysseus,⁵² suggesting a bold alternative to what the hero should actually be seeking: not homecoming, but a new horizon. Although this new speech could slot into the Homeric text between *Od.* 11.60 and 66, it is much more likely that MacLeish constructs his ancient framework merely to suggest a symbolic parallel, a past model for the current American situation (both Odysseus and Depression-era Americans endured a stressful and uncertain journey through hardships), which his nation can choose either to relive or revise.

In the first part of the poem, MacLeish's Elpenor describes the 'Hell' in which he finds himself:

And the place I believe to be Hell from the
Many dead and the pelts of

Great captains: emperors:
Princes: leaders of men:

Their rumps turned round to the wind:
And the rich with their eyes hidden:

And the redblooded twofisted gogetting
He-ghosts froghonking wretchedly:
[...]
And beyond under the lees are the

Actual dead: the millions
Only a god could have killed –

Millions starving for corn with
Mountains of waste corn and

Millions cold for a house with
Cities of empty houses and

Millions naked for cloth and the

⁵² Cf. Horace *Satires* 2.5, a parodic version of Tiresias' speech to Odysseus in the underworld, similarly greatly expanded.

Looms choked with the cloth-weave: (lines 14-21, 31-9)

These harrowing images depict not Homer's underworld, but the actual world in the aftermath of World War I, and in the midst of the Great Depression. MacLeish recalled the context of the poem's composition:

During the early years of the Depression, the efforts of the government (in fact even before Mr. Roosevelt came in) were directed to a return to the prosperity of the twenties and the orderly and more or less pleasant life in America that Americans had been living off and on, with recessions in between every four or five years, for half a century. The direction was all back toward what we've lost.⁵³

Like Odysseus, early twentieth-century Americans were looking over their shoulders, longing for a return to their prior 'home' in economic and political stability, before the depression and before the war. Some leaders even promoted this nostalgia, a type of mistaken guidance that MacLeish represents in the poem by invoking the prophet Tiresias.⁵⁴ The poet's Elpenor mocks the seer's guidance:

Let tit-formed Tiresias tell you
Tasting the blood helm
The way back by the fells and the

Hate and the wars and the envy of
Men aroused against men –
With a Heaven-on-earth at the end of it! (lines 70-75)

This dismissive summary recalls Tiresias' speech to Odysseus in the underworld (*Od.* 11.100-37), in which the prophet foretells that the hero will return home to slay the suitors in his halls ('the envy of/ Men aroused against men').

Elpenor urges Odysseus to correct this wistful thinking, forget returning home and sail instead to an unknown shore:

You had best – if you ask me –
Sail on by the sun to the seaward

Till you come to a clean place
With the smell of the pine in your faces and

Broom and a bitter turf
And the larks blown over the surf and the

Rocks red to the wave-height:
No sound but the wave's:

⁵³ Drabeck & Ellis (1986), 87.

⁵⁴ Tiresias also appears famously in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and before that in Tennyson's poem 'Tiresias'.

No call of a cock from the
Windward shore nor of oxen –

Gull's shadow for hawk's:
Gull's cry for the hawk's cry –⁵⁵ (lines 98-109)

MacLeish (and President Roosevelt, in whose administration the poet served) wished the same forward-looking hopefulness for depressed America. Still describing the poem's origins, MacLeish explained:

Roosevelt's great perception was that [backwards] 'warn't' the way to turn; that it's the other way; that we had to move ahead – we had to move ahead into a wholly new conception of the operation between government and people. Mr. Roosevelt is dismissed by the bright boys as not being quite intelligent enough to see that, but he was a lot more intelligent than they were. And he did see it very clearly. This was a point in time in which you really did have to make a physical effort to turn around and look ahead. Nobody wanted to look ahead; that way lay disaster. Each day was worse than the last. Banks would drop 50 points one day and 180 the next and the more you looked ahead, the worse things got. And people went out windows because they couldn't face the thought of what the next morning was going to be like. So at least part of 'Elpenor' involves the necessity of an acceptance of the disaster and a move through it toward something out there, instead of hiding back here.⁵⁶

In just this way, MacLeish's Rooseveltian Elpenor suggests that, upon reaching a new shore, Odysseus start fresh and never look back:

And begin it again: start over
Forgetting the raised loaves and the

Fat cows and the larders of
Sweating stone – the arms of a

Naked girl under lamb-skins:
Begin it again with the hammer of

Hard rain on your heads and the
Raw fern for your bedding and

Thirst and the thorn to grow –
Bringing yourselves to a home
By your own arms and the boat in

Spite of gods and the prophecy: (lines 116-127)

⁵⁵ This instruction to travel onward to an unfamiliar place, based on lines from Tiresias' prophecy ('set off, taking with you a well-balanced oar, and travel until you reach a people who do not know the sea and do not eat their food seasoned with salt. These men will know nothing of crimson-bowed ships nor of well-balanced oars, which are the wings of ships', *Od.* 11.121-3), has inspired a good share of modern interpretations, most prominently Tennyson 'Ulysses' (1842), but also among my sample corpus (and perhaps receiving Homer through Tennyson), Mark Van Doren 'Odysseus' and 'To Homer' (both 1948); John Ciardi 'Ulysses' (1959); Kenneth Pitchford 'Odysseus with the Oar' (1964); Allen Grossman 'Tales of Odysseus' (1965); Richmond Lattimore 'Odysseus' (1968); Carl Dennis 'Ithaca' (1979); Peter Davison 'On Ithaca' (1981); and Jay Parini 'In the Sphere of Common Duties' (1988).

⁵⁶ Drabeck & Ellis (1986), 87-8.

‘Gods and the prophecy’ perhaps refers to Homer and the existing, well-known *Odyssey*. In other words, Americans should look forward and progress, rather than gazing backward and seeking their old way of life, despite the established ‘prophecy’ (given explicitly by Tiresias in *Od.* 11, and fulfilled by the narrative) of Odysseus’ long-assured homecoming. America need not repeat its own past, nor live out the well-worn patterns of the Homeric epic.

As an epic reception, this poem is a true ‘reduction’, diminishing the entire *Odyssey* into stock symbols: Elpenor as the fallen, forgotten soldier and the common-man prophet; Odysseus as the lost journeyer, on the brink of repeating his age-old mistake, of returning to a home plagued by troubles. As ‘public speech’, though, the poem succeeds three times over: it is accessible, worldly and heartening. Its language is straightforward, specifically designed to be understandable in performance before a large audience,⁵⁷ and its central characters are well-known, taken from a twice-famous story (from Homer, of course; and also from Pound’s more recent Canto 1, which features an unburied Elpenor as an anonymous monument to the war dead);⁵⁸ its mode is patently allegorical, and its clear subject the ‘world of events’ that MacLeish considered it an urgent responsibility of poets to interpret; and its images are genuinely uplifting (free-flying gulls, untouched beaches, bright sun and cleansing rain), reminding Americans of the hopeful origins of their nation (in an unblemished ‘New World’), and of its continued function as a progressive place, a fresh version of history and a new horizon. The Homeric epic, although itself not greatly illuminated in this instance, catalysed an artistically compelling, and historically interesting, new poem.

⁵⁷ MacLeish composed the poem to be read out loud: ‘One has to remember that it was [...] a Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard, and a Phi Beta Kappa poem has to be read to the audience so this had to be a poem which could be understood in a public reading. It’s constructed with that in mind; that is, the images at the beginning are static images of an impotent and paralyzed time, sinking deeper and deeper into the mire, the young playing no admirable part in it. And then it does move on to a series of metaphors of movement, of voice, new land, or new arrivals, discovery. I like that poem. I quite frequently read it aloud. It was meant to read aloud well and it does’ (Drabek & Ellis (1986), 87).

⁵⁸ On *Canto* 1, see Thurston (2001), 13-14, and Bates (2010), 221-2.

Allen Tate: The Aeneid as a Note of Warning

Allen Tate was another politically engaged American poet who employed ancient epic as a point of contrast against which to define modern reality.⁵⁹ Like his contemporary and acquaintance Archibald MacLeish, Tate recognised a crisis in American society, but he identified it not as deep fear after traumatic world events, but as detachment from community and tradition following the technological and social advances of the early twentieth century. Tate was convinced that ‘men were inescapably creatures of history and community’ and ‘have always needed a more or less unified civilization around a set of common values to realize their full humanity’.⁶⁰ In his view, the modern ‘crisis of Western civilization [...] amounted to a war against the institutions (family, church, and society) and beliefs (the omnipotence and omniscience of God and the servitude, imperfection, and mortality of man) that had anchored and sustained the unified culture of Christendom for at least six hundred years’.⁶¹ To redress this social emergency, Tate believed, America must resurrect the traditional values (piety, patriotism, simplicity, selflessness) exemplified by the great civilisations of European history (reaching back to the Romans), and still maintained in one diminished but admirable modern-day oasis: the American South. As a leader in the Southern Agrarian movement, Tate published vehement essays and articles to this effect (contributing, for instance, to the famous Agrarian manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*),⁶² warning America against the dangers of self-centred individualism, and urging a shift back to the economic and social traditionalism that had sustained Western civilisation since its inception (with the South already leading by example), before society degenerated too far to turn back.

⁵⁹ John Orley Allen Tate (1899-1979) was born in Kentucky and educated at Vanderbilt University, where he was admitted to the Fugitives, a group of Southern poets and intellectuals (including John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks) who met weekly to discuss their art and heritage. The group later evolved into the Southern Agrarians, a more formal movement intent on guiding society back to a simple, agricultural, community-based way of life, as exemplified by the Old South before the Civil War and increasingly abandoned by ‘progressive’ modern society. Tate devoted his career to teaching and writing, and upon retirement was an internationally regarded poet, essayist and commentator. For a thorough and authoritative biography, see Underwood (2001).

⁶⁰ Explications of Tate’s views from Malvasi (1997), 151 and 107.

⁶¹ Malvasi (1997), 148.

⁶² *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930), by Twelve Southerners.

Paradoxically, however, Tate did not consider it to be the duty of the poet to address this pressing need for social remedy. In fact, he actively believed the opposite, stating plainly in a letter: 'I have long opposed, privately and publicly, the overt action of American men of letters in immediate political issues'.⁶³ He suggested that poetry was not even capable of the straightforward argument and persuasion that would enable it to engage politically: 'Literature has never communicated. [...] It cannot *communicate*'.⁶⁴ The poet's actual responsibility, according to Tate, was to depict the world as it is, not to guide or instigate its evolution. He wrote: 'To suggest that poets tell men in crisis what to do, to insist that *as poets* they acknowledge themselves legislators of the social order, is to ask them to shirk their specific responsibility, which is quite simply the reality of man's experience, not what his experience ought to be, in any age'.⁶⁵ It seems that Tate separated his life as a political thinker, commentator and activist, from his life as a serious poet.⁶⁶

This principle did not, however, prevent him from writing important 'political' poetry, if we define such work as evaluating the status quo in clear and affecting ways.⁶⁷ In fact, Tate quite often depicted reality as it is *and* subtly judged it in the same moment, allowing his poems to fulfil his main objective as a poet, but also to offer strong hints of political commentary. His most common mode for these poems of simultaneous illustration and judgment was classical reception,⁶⁸ and especially the use of ancient myth as symbol, by which to establish a comparison between a contemporary and ancient scenario, which served to define modern America as a place of loss and degeneration, in contrast to the ideal of the

⁶³ Dunaway (1992), 41.

⁶⁴ Tate (1952), 342. What poetry could achieve, in Tate's view, was 'communion', the uniting of human beings across time and space: 'Works of literature, from the short lyric to the long epic [are] a participation in communion' (Tate (1952), 342).

⁶⁵ Tate (1951), 333.

⁶⁶ Tate (1951) wished that other poets would implement a similar separation, noting pithily: 'If society indicted and condemned poets for the mixture and misuse of two great modes of action, poetry and politics, we might have to indict Mr. Pound a second time, [...] and we should have in fairness to provide an adjoining cell for Mr. MacLeish' (332-3).

⁶⁷ Of course a poet's theories are not always 'a reliable guide' to his practice, as Hoffman (2001) observes of the careers of Eliot, Pound and Frost. So Tate is in good company in having his 'actual poetic practice diverge from [his] theory' (7).

⁶⁸ The list of Tate's other receptions of epic includes 'Ode to the Confederate Dead', 'Aeneas at New York' and 'The Mediterranean'. For analysis of these works, see Feder (1972), Lind (1980), Wiltshire (1985) and Ziolkowski (1993).

heroic age.⁶⁹ Tate was adept at Greek and Latin languages and literature,⁷⁰ and he certainly did engage with ancient texts to highlight and enrich ‘the vitality of language’ in his new poems,⁷¹ at least secondarily. However, his primary interest in Greek and Roman poetry was in the history that the ancient works memorialise. Tate lived and wrote with a deep awareness of cultural lineage, of the full arc of human evolution in the west. He viewed the modern world through the accretion of civilisations that preceded and shaped it, and regretted the indifference with which most Americans in the industrial age regarded their receding cultural ancestry. Or rather, he looked wistfully backward *from* the current age, through its intermediate stages, to its pure origin in the ancient Mediterranean. As Feder suggested: ‘[Tate] is not a neo-classicist in the sense that he decorates with a classical flourish or repeats the old formulas. [...] He knows the classics too well. His classicism exists not in external, imitative manners, but in his way of thought and of feeling in poetry’.⁷² In other words, Tate’s knowledge of classics is an integral part of his worldview, and one of his deeply ingrained lenses for interpreting the world in poetry. When he refers to Virgil or Aeneas or Rome or Troy, therefore, he invokes not a specific scene from a story or passage from a text, but rather a set of comprehensive, consciously imagined and personally significant symbols embodying the civilisations and values of America’s crucial (in Tate’s view), and tragically forgotten, heritage.⁷³

Take the poem ‘Aeneas at Washington’ (1936), Tate’s tragic monologue in the voice of Virgil’s hero, transported to twentieth-century America, standing on the banks of the Potomac River ‘in the rain [...] at nightfall’ (line 32), looking at the glowing dome of the

⁶⁹ Malvasi (1997) pointed out that, ‘although Tate was quick to point out that the “perfect” traditional society had never existed, could never exist, and was, in fact, an illusion, he maintained that such a society had always existed [hypothetically,] as a point of reference by which to judge historical reality, as an ideal toward which to strive’ (107).

⁷⁰ See Ziolkowski (1993), 166, for a thorough account of the poet’s classical education.

⁷¹ Tate (1952), 335.

⁷² Feder (1972), 191.

⁷³ On Tate’s use of the ancient world as symbol, cf. Feder (1972), 175.

Capitol building reflected in the dark water, and remembering Troy.⁷⁴ The poem begins with a translation of *Aeneid* 2.499-502:

I myself saw furious with blood
Neoptolemus, at his side the black Atridae,
Hecuba and the hundred daughters, Priam
Cut down, his filth drenching the holy fires. (lines 1-4)

These lines establish straightaway the ‘extremity’ (line 5) that Aeneas has faced, and overcome, in his mission to found a new civilisation. Reminders of his other losses follow and accumulate throughout the first stanza:

In that extremity I bore me well,
A true gentleman, valorous in arms,
Disinterested and honourable. Then fled:
That was a time when civilization fell to the many, and
Crashed to the shout of men, the clang of arms:
Cold victualing I seized, I hoisted up
The old man my father upon my back,
In the smoke made by sea for a new world
Saving little – a mind imperishable
If time is, a love of past things tenuous
As the hesitation of receding love. (lines 5-16)

In the aftermath of the war, Aeneas had to let go of the city of Troy (which ‘fell’ and from which he ‘fled’), Anchises (‘the old man my father upon my back’, who died on the journey) and his wife Creusa (‘receding love’, also lost along the way). In other words, he was forced from his home more or less empty-handed, taking with him only memory and respect for tradition. After the hero ‘made by sea for a new world’ (line 13) and achieved ‘the reduction of uncited littorals’ (line 17) in a virgin land (phrases that imply the settlement of both the Italian and the American wilderness), he suddenly beheld Troy and America in the same glance:

I saw the thirsty dove
In the glowing fields of Troy, hemp ripening
And tawny corn, the thickening Blue Grass
All lying rich forever in the green sun. (lines 21-4)

These lines conflate the civilisations,⁷⁵ depicting the fields of Troy as lush with native American crops – a proud and luxuriant image that appears to take Aeneas full circle, back to

⁷⁴ For other readings of ‘Aeneas at Washington’ (all of which informed mine to various degrees), see Ziolkowski (1993), 171-3; Lind (1980), 125-6; Feder (1972), 175-9; and Kirchwey (2010), 472-3.

Aeneas and contemplating death, the queen imagines that she hears the voice of the departed hero in the night, and does hear the ill-omened cry of an owl on the rooftops:

hinc exaudiri voces et verba vocantis
visi viri, nox cum terras obscura teneret,
solaque culminibus ferali carmine bubo
saepe queri et longas in fletum ducere voces (*Aen.* 4.460-3)

When the darkness of night covered the earth, she thought she heard, coming from this shrine, the voice of her husband and the words he uttered as he called to her, and all the while the lonely owl kept up its long dirge upon the roof, drawing out its doleful song of death.

These lines are recalled, unmistakably, in the final piercing sound in Tate's poem. Looking out at night upon the alien city of Washington ('the city my blood had built I knew no more'), Aeneas listens as 'the screech-owl whistled his new delight/ Consecutively dark'. Dido hearing the ominous owl-song on her palace roof in ancient Carthage is remembered and rewritten here, millennia later, as a time-warped Aeneas noticing the 'new delight' of an American owl in twentieth-century Washington, this creature a broken version of the original omen, rejoicing foolishly in the wrong thing, in a thoughtless, degenerated nation that has abandoned its ancient roots.

The poem hinges on its sense of tragic loss, which reverberates within all of the symbolic associations in play. As a Southerner, the Aeneas figure has lost the Civil War, and autonomy over the future of his beloved region; as a Trojan hero, he has lost another war, as well as his family, his independent will and the right to remain in his homeland; as an ancient character transplanted into a disillusioning modern scene, Aeneas has lost faith that his past struggles ('Troy, what we had built her for', and the desertion of Dido, implied in the owl image) were worth the pain, since his achievements do not appear to be appreciated or understood by his distant cultural descendents. This multi-layered grief – of Aeneas, of the defeated Southern gentleman, of the politically concerned poet Tate – was palpable to Donald Davidson, who reacted, in a letter to Tate, to a draft of the poem:

'Aeneas at Washington' is a stronger poem [than 'The Mediterranean', which became more famous], a really tremendous one; it drags me to the deeps, but also stirs me with some of the profound fury that must have stirred the Stonewall Brigade in its bloodiest moments. I think you are doing in it just what the poets ought to do: keep thundering away at the defilers of the altar, and reminding people of the thirsty grandeur of the tradition they are neglecting.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Fain & Young (1974), 281.

The image of Virgil's miserable hero surveying the New World with despair, wondering if his ancient trials were wasted, is a chilling definition of America, and a political warning that reverberates deeper and louder through the epic comparison.

Robert Pinsky: American Multiplicity and Homeric Imagination

Robert Pinsky is a final example of a socially conscious modern poet who turns to ancient epic to explain America by contrast.⁸¹ Like Tate, Pinsky believes in social connectedness as our fundamental nature. He wrote, in the essay 'Responsibilities of the Poet': 'We live together, rather than separately like Cyclopes, or otherwise perish in a generation'.⁸² Furthermore, Pinsky envisions a role for poetry as one of the bonds capable of uniting disparate people and cultures, throughout the world and within the melting pot of the modern American nation. He 'has devoted his career to promoting the idea of poetry as a social presence',⁸³ through efforts like his lauded 'Favorite Poem Project', which records and publishes reflections on poetry by ordinary Americans, to spark dialogue and connection.⁸⁴ In Pinsky's opinion, this powerfully unifying art is also a link between the past and the present, and is the main charge of the poet, who must both evolve it ingeniously, and safeguard it for the next generation. Pinsky defined his conception of the poet's role in the world in these words: 'As poets, one of our responsibilities is to mediate between the dead and the unborn. [...] By practicing an art learned partly from the dead, one keeps it alive for the unborn'.⁸⁵ But sustaining it is not enough: poets must also change their craft, enhance it by putting it to new and unforeseen uses. Pinsky explained: 'Only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic,

⁸¹ Robert Pinsky (1940-) was educated at Rutgers and Stanford universities (receiving a Ph.D. in philosophy), and has spent his career teaching (at Wellesley College, Berkeley and Boston University) and writing (poetry, criticism and theoretical essays). Among his many public engagement initiatives, Pinsky served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 1997-2000 and founded the 'Favorite Poem Project', to encourage Americans to foster an active, personal and collective connection with poetry. See Gwiazda (2008) for further biographical details.

⁸² Pinsky (1988), 86.

⁸³ Gwiazda (2008), 86.

⁸⁴ See the project's official website, www.favoritepoem.org.

⁸⁵ Pinsky (1988), 86.

that which has not already been made poetic by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no new use, the art rots'.⁸⁶ In other words, 'to put it simply, [...] we have in our care and for our use and pleasure a valuable gift, and we must answer both for preserving it, and for changing it'.⁸⁷ A concurrent duty of the poet is to 'bear witness' to the world as it is (similar to Tate, again, but with a stronger undertone of social conscience): 'We must use the art to behold the actual evidence before us. We must answer for what we see'.⁸⁸ Pinsky considers this to be a more difficult and more profound task than mere political reasoning:

If political or moral advocacy were all we had to answer for [as poets], that would be almost easy. Witness goes further, I think, because it involves the challenge of not flinching from the evidence. It proceeds from judgment to testimony. In the most uncompromising sense, this means that whatever important experience seems least poetic to me is likely my job.⁸⁹

Here the two goals meld into the same undertaking: to introduce the present world ('the actual evidence before us') into the tradition of poetry (hitherto unfamiliar with the 'unpoetic' subject of modernity's most recent realities), thus advancing the art, shaping it to retain relevance for future poets and readers, by making it speak to the evidence of modern life.

Pinsky's most important achievement in these regards – both a contribution to the tradition, and an act of witness for the modern world – is his poem 'An Explanation of America'.⁹⁰ Published in 1979, in a volume of the same title, it is a long, meditative address (over 1,300 lines) to his young daughter, in which he reflects, conversationally and colourfully, on the nation into which she was born.⁹¹ The poem is divided into three main parts – 'Its Many Fragments' (Part 1), 'Its Great Emptiness' (Part 2), and 'Its Everlasting Possibility' (Part 3) – and four subsections within each part (designated by Roman numerals);

⁸⁶ Pinsky (1988), 87.

⁸⁷ Pinsky (1988), 89.

⁸⁸ Pinsky (1988), 87.

⁸⁹ Pinsky (1988), 87.

⁹⁰ Pinsky (1979).

⁹¹ Sorkin (1984) called it an 'ambitious' poem, 'which includes not only cultural and political interpretation but also such other modes of "explanation" as literary criticism, translation, cultural comparison, direct consideration of public concerns, metaphor-making in illustration of idea, and philosophical rumination' (1). Pinsky himself called it 'experimental', and was very proud of it (Gwiazda (2008), 88).

and it recalls both an intimate, casual, meandering letter, and also a High Modernist document, composed of fragments of scattered texts.⁹²

As a work of social criticism and political ‘witness’, the poem is best understood as an examination of ‘some of the most salient features of the United States’ self-construction – exceptionalism, expansionism, individualism – against the backdrop of the emerging ideology of multiculturalism’ in the late twentieth century.⁹³ As an entry into the poetic tradition, it is a highly successful variation on the American long poem, a genre pioneered by Whitman, Pound and Williams (among others), in response to ‘dissatisfaction with the brief Romantic lyric’, and a related urge to reclaim for poetry some of the narrative ‘ground lost in this century to the novel’.⁹⁴ As a reception and ‘reduction’ of ancient epic, it could be considered an *epyllion* or ‘miniature epic’, a variation on *epos* that is diminutive both in scale (in classical literature, the term comprises works of up to about 1,000 hexameters) and in tone (the subject of *epyllion* ‘tends to be more subjective and emotional than in formal epic’, as in Pinsky’s poem).⁹⁵ It also joins the work of MacLeish and Tate in employing references to Homer, in an active political poem, as symbols through which to define and clarify the modern experience in America.

In fact, comparison is Pinsky’s most striking poetic technique in this poem. He sets up constant parallelisms of plot, imagery and language,⁹⁶ to illustrate his sense of America as

⁹² In the poem, Pinsky quotes J.V. Cunningham (Part 1.II), Churchill (1.III), Gogol, Joyce (1.IV), Homer, Nietzsche (2.II), Horace (giving, in fact, a full translation of *Epistles* 1.16, in which Horace quotes yet another text – Euripides’ *Bacchae*, 2.III), Jonson (3.I), the New Testament, John Jack the slave (3.III), Shakespeare and Whitman (3.IV), among references that I could recognise. On the poem’s affinities with Modernist poetics, see Bowditch (1996), 455-6.

⁹³ Gwiazda (2008), 88.

⁹⁴ Parini (1981), 17.

⁹⁵ Hornblower & Spawforth (2003), 550.

⁹⁶ Examples of Pinsky’s extended, discursive comparisons include: America compared to a nest, or a bird cage; the country, and the world, to a prison; the citizen-poet to a prison chaplain (Part 1.III); the country as a troika (quoting Gogol, 1.IV); childhood happiness outside in nature as death; the vast openness of the American prairie as the love of death; the lonely man as the vast prairie (2.I); Americans in a strange land as Odysseus; men afraid of the potential inherent in empty spaces as Homeric monsters (Cyclopes and Laestrygonians), living barbarously and alone; violent settlers as the killer Odysseus; a nightmare as a Cyclops; Americans as Romans (2.II); an American on the prairie as Horace on his Sabine farm; Pinsky’s daughter as Horace, or as Brutus; Horace’s freed-slave father as an Eastern European immigrant to America, or as Pinsky (2.IV); the country as a fetus, subconsciously aware of the past (3.I); the empire as a whale or serpent, within whose belly its citizens live (3.II); Chicago on a Sunday morning as a child’s diorama, made with dolls and animals and household objects; and churchgoers as a self-made memorial, a future fossil (3.III).

an unlikely union of entities both alike and profoundly disparate.⁹⁷ One argument of the poem (according to Gwiazda) is ‘that the divided, fragmented society signified by that much contested term – “America” – can be made whole by a shared act of imagination’,⁹⁸ by its diverse citizens striving to grasp the similarities that unite them. Pinsky achieves this observation by stating it explicitly, at times,⁹⁹ but more effectively, he enacts it throughout the poem by creating pairs of unlike entities, and inviting the reader to make the mental leap between them, to imagine what they share in common. Even the very first stanza introduces the poem’s subject matter by comparison with a seemingly unrelated topic, establishing instantly the importance of associations to the logic of this work:

As though explaining the idea of dancing
Or the idea of some other thing
Which everyone has known a little about
Since they were children, which children learn themselves
With no explaining, but which children like
Sometimes to hear the explanations of,
I want to tell you something about our country,
Or my idea of it: explaining it
If not to you, to my idea of you. (Part 1.I)

Pinsky suggested in his poetic criticism, that the complexity and confusion of American heterogeneity emerges in American poetry as a unique quality of ‘heteroglossia’, the melding and contrasting of the incongruent sources and languages and ideas of which the country is comprised:

The questioning demanded by our heterogeneous life finds its expression in heteroglossia. American poetry’s exploitation of the English language’s immense and bastardized vocabulary, including the abstraction and formality tied to Latinate words, the physicality and plainness of German words, is only one example of such sensitive mixing and blending. The American poet’s relation to levels of syntax, or to kinds of lore and learning, breaking and rearranging ideas of high and low, might offer other examples.¹⁰⁰

This poem, I believe, represents exactly this sort of American multiplicity, on several levels: quoted voices from across history and cultures; lofty abstractions, tempered with visceral, concretising imagery; and especially, comparisons between unlike things – all in an attempt to

⁹⁷ Pinsky believes that ‘our national genius is polyglot, syncretic, culturally diverse, rebellious toward any would-be presiding aristocratic center’ (Downing & Kunitz (1997)).

⁹⁸ Gwiazda (2008), 88.

⁹⁹ E.g. Part 2.I.

¹⁰⁰ Pinsky (1988), 131.

resolve in poetry ‘the questioning demanded by our heterogeneous life’, to comprehend how such mystifying diversity can combine to make a single place, America.

Pinsky’s references to the *Odyssey* follow this formula,¹⁰¹ comparing Homeric characters to modern Americans, to define America as a union of distant poles. For example, in describing the necessity of imagination in making a foreign place intelligible for oneself, Pinsky cites Odysseus:

In a way, every stranger must imagine
The place where he finds himself – as shrewd Odysseus
Was able to imagine, as he wandered,
The ways and perils of a foreign place:
Making his goal, not knowing the real place,
But his survival, and his progress home.
And everyone has felt it – foreign ground,
With its demand on the imagination
Like the strange gaze of the cattle of the Sun –
[...]
People who must, like immigrants or nomads,
Live always in imaginary places
Think of some past or word to fill a blank –
The encampment at the Pole or at the Summit;
Comanches in Los Angeles; the Jews
Of Russia or Roumania, who lived
In Israel before it was a place or thought,
But a pure, memorized word which they knew better
Than their own hands [,] (2.II)

like the word ‘Ithaca’ in the mind of wandering Odysseus. Critics have mistakenly read Pinsky’s Odysseus (in his various appearances throughout the poem, including the passage above) traditionally, ‘as the archetypal wanderer and appropriate symbol of rootlessness’.¹⁰² Instead, Odysseus here represents a unifying force, like America or American imagination, a wise consciousness that can process and survive and assimilate a series of unlike cultures and settings; and also a home-maker, who can nurture and achieve safety despite the rich variety of experience with which he must first contend. This symbolic identity is confirmed in another section of the poem, defining nationhood:

And so, although a famous wanderer
Defines a nation, ‘The same people living
In the same place,’ by such transformations

¹⁰¹ In addition to the three examples quoted in this chapter, references to the *Odyssey* in ‘An Explanation of America’ occur in Part 1.III (Americans as ‘conquering immigrants’ like ‘the Dorians’); and Part 2.II (disconnected Americans as ‘Cyclopes’, ‘Laestrygonians’, and ‘Polyphemus’ with his ‘pet ram’; ‘a Greek adventurer’; and a nightmare as ‘The Cyclops’).

¹⁰² Bowditch (1996), 466.

Of time the motion from place to place itself
 May come to be the place we have in common.
 [...]
 For *place*, itself, is always a kind of motion,
 A part of it artificial and preserved,
 And a part born in a blur of loss and change –
 All places in motion from where we thought they were,
 Boston before it was Irish or Italian,
 Harlem and Long Branch before we ever knew
 That they were beautiful, and when they were:
 Our nation, mellowing to another country
 Of different people living in different places. (1.IV)

The ‘famous wanderer’ here is again Odysseus, but this time embodied by Leopold Bloom, the protagonist from James Joyce’s epic Modernist novel *Ulysses* (1922). Pinsky quotes

Bloom twice in the lines above, from the following scene:

--But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.
 --Yes, says Bloom.
 --What is it? says John Wyse.
 --A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.
 --By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that’s so I’m a nation for I’m living in the same place for the past five years.
 So of course everyone had the laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:
 --Or also living in different places. (*Ulysses* 12.1422-28)

Bloom (Odysseus) becomes in this exchange a political theorist, a nation-builder concerned with formulating a viable definition of a difficult, amorphous thing. The hero’s suggestion – that a nation can be ‘the same people living in the same place’, and ‘also living in different places’ – requires imagination to assimilate; and his ‘nation’ thus begins to sound like Pinsky’s ‘America’, diverse and scattered and implausible, and yet somehow still whole.

Even regarding the messy, immoral aspects of forging a home out of divided pieces, Odysseus (slaying the suitors to secure the peace and honour of his family) can provide an analogue for the American impulse to settle at all costs. Pinsky invites us to picture that ‘such a man’, travelling across the land, ‘sets out upon that empty plain’

to invent a mystic home –
 And then discovers people there, engaged
 Upon their commerce or their gossip, at home
 Or wandering as in an actual place,
 Attending to their ordinary business:
 The ordinary passion to bring death
 For gain or glory, as Odysseus
 Might feel, would be augmented and inflamed
 By the harsh passion of a settler; and so,
 Why wouldn’t he bring his death to Indians
 Or Jews, or Greeks who stop for food and water
 To bustle and jabber on his tangled plain? (2.II)

Of course this ‘ordinary passion to bring death’ is a nasty urge, but it is the timeless, dark underside of the home-making drive, which Pinsky recognises in Odysseus. The poet observed of the famous figure: ‘The greatest hero in literature, I think, is Odysseus: he is so much smarter than the rest. And although he knows how to kill – quite brutally sometimes, I admit – his great goal is to preserve a home, a place where people can live together suitably and nobly’.¹⁰³

Of course Pinsky’s Homeric hero also represents, more simply and perhaps more importantly, the past; and the poet’s comparisons of modern Americans and ancient Greeks exemplify his overarching belief about history, explored throughout this poem: that human existence is constant, and united across time and space.¹⁰⁴ This conclusion stands out among the poem’s various arguments and reflections – that we are all the same, and that the world and its history, like America, is a miraculous unity of seemingly irreconcilable beings. In the final section of the poem, Pinsky demonstrates the very act of imagination that allows Americans – and, indeed, human beings in general – to transcend apparent differences and see that they are all alike, after all. In Part 3.IV, Pinsky invents ‘a dazzling city’, built ‘on a lake/
Beyond the fastness of a mountain pass’, a place

Of terraced fountains and mosaic walls
With rainbow-colored carp and garish birds
To adorn the public gardens. In the streets,
The artisans of feathers, bark or silk
Traded with trappers, with French and Spanish priests
And Scottish grocers. From the distant peaks,
The fabulous creatures of the past descended
To barter or to take wives: minotaur
And centaur clattered on the cobbled streets
With Norseman and Gipsy; from the ocean floor
The mermaid courtesans came to Baltimore,
New Orleans, Galveston, their gilded aquaria
Tended by powdered Blacks.

The figures populating this strange and remarkable place then include ‘the Founders’ and ‘the very wolf of Rome’, and the vision begins to resemble a nascent America:

¹⁰³ Sorkin (1984), 15.

¹⁰⁴ For images of universal sameness, see (e.g.) 1.II, 1.IV and 3.II. That Pinsky has been a professor in liberal arts environments for over forty years perhaps shaped this humanist view, in part.

The Founders made
A Union mystic yet rational, and sudden,
As if suckled by the very wolf of Rome.
Indentured paupers and criminals grew rich
Trading tobacco; molasses; cotton; and slaves
With names like horses, or from Scott or Plutarch.
[...]
The Yankees pulled stones from the earth, to farm,
And when the glacial boulders were piled high,
Skilled masons came from Parma and Piacenza
And settled on Division Street and Oak Street
And on the narrow side streets between them.

Finally, the scene morphs into a memory of the ice truck making summer rounds in Pinsky's
childhood town in New Jersey:

In winter,
Mr. Diehl hired Italian boys to help
Harvest the ice from Diehl's Pond onto sledges
And pack it into icehouses, where it kept
To be cut and delivered all summer long.
The Linden Apartments stand where Diehl's Pond was;
But even when I was little, the iceman came
To houses that had iceboxes, and we could beg
Splinters to suck, or maybe even a ride,
Sitting on wet floorboards and steaming tarps
As far as St. Andrew's or the V.F.W.

Everything in human history becomes, in the quiet modulation of this place (from imagined
myth, to colonial America, to personal memory), part of everything else, and

Nothing was lost –
Or rather, nothing seemed to begin or end
In ways they could remember.

In Pinsky's weighing up of the present against the past, America is seen to be diverse, full and
improbable, but not new. Rather, it is part of an ancient continuity reaching back through
time, space and literature, made possible by imagination.

5. Epic Revision: Feminist Versions of the *Odyssey*

Reception as Revision: Giving Voice to Marginalised Characters

By far the most widespread style of epic reduction represented in my sample corpus of poems is what might be called ‘democratic revision’. These mostly short, new poems add socially progressive material to the texts of Homer and Virgil, with the effect of spotlighting, empowering and justifying the minor, marginalised and most often female characters who are relatively overlooked or suppressed in the original stories. These twentieth-century versions are usually ‘focalized’ (spoken, accessed or interpreted to some extent or completely) through the perspectives of the characters themselves, thus combining to ‘foreground what epic tends to submerge: the personal, the occasional, the interior’.¹ By granting this direct lyric focus to peripheral and often aggrieved epic figures, modern poets ‘bring to light [...] the costs, largely overlooked by Homer [and Virgil], of playing a supporting role in [the] story’.²

Most of these costs, the ‘alternative possibilities alluded to, implicit in or suppressed by the Homeric [or Virgilian] epic itself’, but never allowed or fulfilled in the original text,³ arise from disparities in gender roles, and other unequal circumstances of fortune and power.⁴ By highlighting the human price of the heroic story and permitting alternative accounts to be heard, the modern poems collectively take a possible step toward redressing the social, political and interpersonal injustices of the epic world and the epic tradition. By correcting the balance across lines of gender and class, admitting voices excluded by Homer and Virgil that are now recognised as valid and essential in twentieth-century society and achieving

¹ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 4. See Doherty (2001), 122-3 for further definition of narrative focalization.

² Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 11.

³ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 6.

⁴ For works of criticism focused on gender issues in ancient epic, see e.g. Foley (1978), Easterling (1991), Gold (1993), Felson (1994), Doherty (1995), Schein (1995) and Keith (2000). For a study of social class dynamics regarding the *Odyssey*, see Thalmann (1998).

‘reversals of social and narrative hierarchy’,⁵ these versions democratise and modernise ancient epic for a new period.

Figures who have gained a prominence and agency in modern American poetry denied to them in the original texts include slaves (Eurycleia),⁶ supernatural creatures (Polyphemus,⁷ Proteus,⁸ Calypso,⁹ Circe,¹⁰ the Sirens¹¹), forgotten or slighted male characters (Elpenor,¹² Palinurus),¹³ anonymous individuals in the background of the stories (foot soldiers, a sentry, a local peasant girl, minor suitors, the hypothetical female poet of the *Odyssey*)¹⁴ and elite women (Dido,¹⁵ Helen,¹⁶ Andromache,¹⁷ Nausicaa,¹⁸ Penelope¹⁹) – all of

⁵ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 6. The idea of poetry as ‘redress’ was expressed by Seamus Heaney (1990): ‘Poetry is an agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices. [...] This redress of poetry comes from its being a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances’ (4).

⁶ Adrienne Rich ‘Eurycleia’s Tale’ (1963). In cataloguing the poems cited in this chapter, I have relied especially on the anthology by DeNicola (1999), the index of receptions by Reid (1993) and references from essays by Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), Doherty (2009) and Hurst (2009).

⁷ For twentieth-century American poems focalized through Polyphemus, see Joseph Auslander ‘Cyclops’ Eye’ (1926); W.D. Snodgrass ‘Noman...No man’ (1959); Gregory Corso ‘Mortal Infliction’ (1960); Diann Blakely ‘Polyphemus’ (1994); and Victor Howes ‘Polyphemus Perverse’ (1999).

⁸ Examples include Rolfe Humphries ‘Proteus, or, The Shapes of Conscience’ (1942); W.S. Merwin ‘Proteus’ (1954); Mark Van Doren ‘Proteus’ (1963); Brewster Ghiselin ‘Answering a Letter from a Younger Poet’ (1970); Maura Stanton ‘Proteus’s Tale’ (1975); and Michael McClure ‘Changer’ (1978).

⁹ For poems on the goddess Calypso, see Edgar Lee Masters ‘Ulysses’ (1921); H.D. ‘Cuckoo Song’ (1921) and ‘Calypso’ (1944); Raymond Holden ‘Calypso’ (1922); William Alexander Percy ‘Calypso to Ulysses’ (1924); Thomas Merton ‘Calypso’s Island’ (1946); Archibald MacLeish ‘Calypso’s Island’ (1962); Peter Kane Dufault ‘Odysseus’ Song to Calypso’ (1963); Peter Davison ‘Calypso’ (1970); Olga Broumas ‘Calypso’ (1977); and Thomas G. Bergin ‘Calypso’ (1978).

¹⁰ For modern American versions of Circe, see H.D. ‘Circe’ (1921); Raymond Holden ‘Circe’ (1922); Witter Bynner ‘Circe’ (1947); William Gibson ‘Circe’ (1949); Horace Gregory ‘Homage to Circe’ (1951); Donald Davison ‘Old Sailor’s Choice’ (1961); Richard Selig ‘The Island: November’ (1962); Richmond Lattimore ‘Circe’ (1968); Robert Duncan ‘At the Loom’ (1968) and ‘Poems from the Margins of Thom Gunn’s *Moly*’ (1984); Alan Dugan ‘At Circe’s Place’ (1973); Olga Broumas ‘Circe’ (1977); Robert Lowell ‘Ulysses and Circe’ (1977); Jack Gilbert ‘The Plundering of Circe’ (1982); Nicholas Christopher ‘Circe in Love’ and ‘Circe Revisited’ (1988); Diann Blakely ‘Circe’ (1992); Richard Howard ‘Telemachus’ (1994); Kenneth Rosen ‘The Odyssey’ (1996); and Louise Glück ‘Circe’s Power’, ‘Circe’s Torment’ and ‘Circe’s Grief’ (1996).

¹¹ On the Sirens, see William Alexander Percy ‘Siren Song’ (1924); Frederic Prokosch ‘Sunburned Ulysses’ (1940); Richard Wilbur ‘The Sirens’ (1950); Horace Gregory ‘A Temptation of Odysseus’ (1951); Donald Finkel ‘The Sirens’ (1957); Maura Stanton ‘A Voice for the Sirens’ (1975); Mekeel McBride ‘Odysseus and the Sirens’ (1979); Linda Pastan ‘The Sirens’ (1988); Louise Glück ‘Siren’ (1996); and Reginald Shepherd ‘Odysseus Becalmed’ (1996).

¹² On Elpenor, see Archibald MacLeish ‘1933’ (1933); William Logan ‘The Death of Elpenor’ (1933); and Richmond Lattimore ‘Elpenor’ (1968).

¹³ On Palinurus, see W.S. Merwin ‘The Bones of Palinurus Pray to the North Star’ (1952).

¹⁴ For overlooked or anonymous figures, see Williams Matthews ‘Achilles’ (1997) (foot soldier); Doug Anderson ‘First Blood’ (foot soldier) and ‘Spoken by the Sentry at Achilles’ Tent’ (sentry) (1994); Charles Simic ‘My Weariness of Epic Proportions’ (1982) (local girl); Robert Bagg ‘Penelope’ (1957) (unnamed suitor); Linda Pastan ‘The Suitor’ (1975) (minor suitor); and Alicia Ostriker ‘Homecoming’ (1982) (female ‘Homer’). On the potentially female identity of the Homeric poet, see Samuel Butler (1897) *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, and Andrew Dalby (2006) *Rediscovering Homer*.

whom were under-appreciated, subordinated, misunderstood or otherwise disenfranchised, with their fictional lives, narrative prominence and literary afterlife controlled and contained by the governing male heroes and narrators.²⁰

¹⁵ American poems focalized through Dido include Frederic Prokosch 'Among the Caves' (1941); J. V. Cunningham 'Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae' (1947); Kenneth Burke 'Of Rome and Carthage' (1968); Rachel Hadas 'After the Cave' (1975); Kathleen Spivack 'Dido: Swarming' (1977); Alan Dugan 'Speech for Aeneas' (1983); Charles Martin 'Dido and Aeneas' (1984); Judith Johnson 'Body Politic' (1992); Linda Pastan 'Dido's Farewell' (1992); and Louise Glück 'The Queen of Carthage' (1999). On the reception of Dido in modern art and literature, see especially Fowler (2009) (for contemporary lyric receptions), and also Burden (1998) and Binder (2000). Gwendolyn Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning poem *Annie Allen* (1949) has a section entitled 'The Anniad', rewriting Aeneas as a female character.

¹⁶ On Helen, see Edgar Lee Masters 'Helen of Troy' (1916); Stephen Vincent Benét 'The First Vision of Helen' and 'The Last Vision of Helen' (1920); John Erskine 'Paris, Helen's Lover' (1922); H.D. 'Helen' (1924), *Helen in Egypt* (1961) and 'Winter Love' (1972); Janet Lewis 'Helen Grown Old' (1924); John Gould Fletcher 'On a Moral Triumph' (1925); Laura Riding 'Helen's Burning' and Helen's Faces' (1938); Muna Lee 'As Helen Once' (1953); Louis Simpson 'Aegean' (1955); Richard Wilbur 'Helen' (1956); Robert Lowell 'Helen' (1961); Kathleen Spivack 'Mythmaking' (1966); Delmore Schwartz 'To Helen' (1979); Bella Zweig 'Paen to Helen' (1981); Zona Teti 'From Nestor to Helen Now of Troy' (1990); Peter Meinke 'Helen' (1991); Doug Anderson 'The War' (1994); Victor Howes 'Paris Puts Down a Rumor' (1994); and Carol Tufts 'Paris and Helen' (1999). On aspects of the post-Homeric reception of Helen, see Austin (1994), Gumpert (2001), Spentzou (2006) and Maguire (2009).

¹⁷ Andromache appears in Mark Van Doren 'Hector Dead' (1953).

¹⁸ On Nausicaa, see James Oppenheim 'Nausicaa' (1924); Robert Bagg 'Two Ballads from Nausicaa' and 'I Met Nausicaa' (1961); Joan Aleshire 'Nausikaa' (1987); Burt Porter 'Odysseus at Ninety Remembers Nausicaa' (1999); Dorothy Belle Pollack 'Mythical Musings: Nausicaa' (1999); and Herman Asarnow 'For Nausicaa: On Searching for a Poem by Someone Else to Send to You' (1999).

¹⁹ For versions of Penelope, by far the most numerous category of reception in this chapter, see H.D. 'At Ithaca' (1924); Dorothy Parker 'Penelope' (1928); Peter Viereck 'Penelope's Loom' (1948); Edna St. Vincent Millay 'An Ancient Gesture' (1954); Wallace Stevens 'The World as Meditation' (1954); Allen Grossman 'Berlin 1955' (1961); Rolfe Humphries 'Arachne, Penelope' (1969); Martha Collins 'Homecoming' (1972); Richmond Lattimore 'Penelope' (1968); Robert Lowell 'Penelope' (1973); Linda Pastan 'Penelope' (1975); Karen Whitehill 'Penelope' (1976); Theodore Weiss 'The Storeroom' (1976); Sanford Pinsker 'Penelope's Reply (with apologies to Tennyson)' (1979); Diane Wakoski 'Daughter Moon' (1980); Katha Pollitt 'Penelope Writes' (1983); Eleanor Wilner 'The World is Not a Meditation' (1984) and 'Ambition' (1998); Richard Howard 'Ithaca: The Palace at Four A.M.' (1984); Robert F. Whisler 'Penelope and Me' (1984); Cynthia MacDonald 'Why Penelope Was Happy' (1985); Maria L. Coughlin 'Penelope's Dream' (1985); Marilyn Hacker 'Mythology' (1986); Jorie Graham 'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay' and 'Ravel and Unravel' (1987); Susan Schultz 'Penelope's Letter to Ulysses' (1990); Betsy Hearne 'Penelope: Polaroid' (1991); James Harrison 'Penelope: For Ken' (1991); Terry Ehret 'A Second Look at Penelope' (1992); Joy Yourcenar 'Penelope' (1994); Burt Porter 'Penelope' (1995); Louise Glück 'Penelope's Song', 'Ithaca' and 'Penelope's Stubbornness' (1996); Robert Darling 'Penelope' (1997); Paul Petrie 'Penelope's Song' (1998); A. V. Christie 'Penelope in Spring' (1999); Emily Hiestand 'The Story Should Spin' (1999); Gabriella Mirolo 'Waiting for Odysseus' (1999); Ionna-Veronika Warwick 'Archaic Penelope' and 'Penelope and Odysseus as One Person' (1999); Judith Page Heitzman 'After Odysseus' (1999); Elinor Wylie 'Penelope' (2000); Lisa Barnett 'Penelope-in-Progress' (2000); and Linda Pastan 'At the Loom' and 'To Penelope' (2002).

²⁰ That receptions in this mode appear to focus on the women of the *Odyssey* in particular (see footnotes above on Calypso, Circe, Nausicaa and Penelope) is perhaps related to the prominence of female characters in that text, and to its depiction by masculine narrators of romantic and domestic (i.e. 'feminine') dramas. The latter circumstance begs reinterpretation from a female point of view, and the former provides ample female perspectives and narrators to explore and embody in new versions.

This technique of ‘interpolation’, of supplementing the epic text and tradition with new information beyond the bounds, or within the gaps, of the original stories, is a time-honoured literary practice. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recorded a tale (13.898-14.74) that illuminated the margins of the *Odyssey*, in which the jealous goddess Circe transforms a lovely maiden Scylla into the dog-loined monster familiar from Homer.²¹ According to Hellanicus of Lesbos, the maiden Nausicaa, memorably eager for marriage when she encounters Odysseus on the coast in *Odyssey* 6, ends up wedding his son Telemachus (*FGrH* 4 F 156).²² The most prevalent site for epic addition and revision is the long-tested marriage of Odysseus and Penelope, which ‘skeptics since antiquity have called impossible and imagined deeper rifts or more lasting infidelities separating the partners’.²³ In Apollodorus (*Epitome* 7.34-40), a series of five alternative endings to the *Odyssey* is presented in quick succession. Lillian Doherty cites a further variation, ‘an extreme case, in which Penelope sleeps with all the suitors[...] reported by Duris of Samos (4C/3C B.C.E.)’.²⁴ These versions combine to comprise

an ancient tradition that redressed the *Odyssey*’s suppression of those characters’ full stories. This tradition was embodied in a poem of the epic cycle that was at once a continuation of the *Odyssey* and a kind of anti-*Odyssey*, the *Telegony* attributed to Eugammon of Cyrene, now known to us through late summaries. In that poem, Odysseus dies, leaving the supporting characters of his story to find happiness without him. [...] In a fantastic conclusion, both of Odysseus’ sons succeed in taking his place and both his faithful wife and his abandoned mistress find new love as Telegonus marries Penelope and Telemachus marries Circe. This marriage of Telemachus and Circe suggests that the ancient epic tradition, like [modern receptions], recognized these figures as similarly excluded, as similar loose ends left by the *Odyssey*.²⁵

Such speculation and imagination about epic alternatives is inspired, most simply, by the necessarily partial account of events that Homer and Virgil present within the scope of their projects. The *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* all begin *in medias res*, and all end somewhat abruptly, leaving audiences curious to know more about the complex and memorable characters, and the consequences of their unresolved actions. Poets and scholars have shown

²¹ Ovid also recounted the Homeric story of Odysseus and Circe (14.308-440). See Papaioannou (2005) on Ovid’s alternative versions of epic. See Segal (1968) on later representations of Homer’s Circe by Virgil (*Aen.* 7.10-20) and Ovid.

²² Cited in Minta (2007).

²³ Doherty (2009), 181.

²⁴ Doherty (2009), 181.

²⁵ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 27.

interest especially in the potentially subversive or surprising details that may exist latently within the epics, but are not explored fully by Homer, for instance, the conflicted and paradoxical behavior of Penelope in the *Odyssey*, who both defends and resists her fidelity to her absent husband, by unweaving her work each night to delay remarriage, but simultaneously seeking gifts from her suitors, relishing their attention and mourning the loss of the geese who symbolise their imminent destruction.²⁶ In addition, the cursory, dismissive, flat or silent portrayal of many characters in epic, in order to focus on the hero, seems to have encouraged recent poets to do justice to those excluded aspects of the stories.²⁷ For instance, Linda Pastan's poem 'The Suitor' 'begins with a judgment on the *Odyssey*'s incompleteness' that represents the tone of this reception practice in general:²⁸ 'There is always a story/ that no one bothers to tell', lines by which the poet objects to the disregard of epic narrators (none of whom 'bothers to tell') for certain perspectives, an oversight that her poem promises to rectify. However, even this gesture – of 'giving voice' in literature to neglected figures as a radically modern act – arguably has ancient roots: in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the character of Euripides praises himself for granting socially marginal characters (women, a slave) the chance to speak for themselves (948-50), and even calls his action 'democratic' (δημοκρατικόν, 952).²⁹

Furthermore, by devising small-scale addenda to the original epics, the modern poets of this chapter in a way repeat the procedure by which Homer and Virgil composed in the first place: choosing sources and topics on which to focus from a diverse literary and mythological tradition, 'a process of selecting and elaborating inherited material', 'of using what he needs and forgetting the rest'.³⁰ As Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah Roberts suggest, recent additions to epic 'represent variant traditions that Homeric epic chooses not to tell or

²⁶ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 25.

²⁷ Stanford (1954) explained the incomplete characterisation of Circe (e.g.) as a function of unfinished adaptation ('Homer had not completely assimilated a traditional figure to his more humanistic style, so that the abruptness of her actions are more those of a marionette than of a fully developed character' (48)), but more recent readers have interpreted such imbalanced character development as bias within a patriarchal system.

²⁸ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 13-14. This poem is also cited in Hurst (2009), 283.

²⁹ The concept of 'giving voice' arises in recent scholarship on feminist receptions, as well, e.g. Ostriker (1986), 279, and Murnaghan (2009), 73.

³⁰ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 27.

not to tell fully. In reimagining Homer's story from a modern perspective, [twentieth-century poets] are also retracing Homer's steps, but in reverse, unmaking ancient choices about what to highlight and what to obscure'.³¹

Modern epic interpolations, then, share in two very old, related practices: focusing on particular material from the tradition to the exclusion of other alternatives (as epic poets did), and revising or adding to existing epic stories (as inheritors of epic have done since antiquity). What makes the phenomenon of 'democratic revision' (the abundant, short, progressive rewritings of Homer and Virgil that appeared in the U.S. since about 1914) uniquely modern is its clear relation to the liberation movements of the twentieth-century, especially second-wave feminism.³² The 'primary goal' of feminism 'was to analyze, combat and overcome the situation of women' in modern life and in history, to counteract the long-standing but unjust reality that 'the world men constructed was the world women lived in';³³ and feminists, both male and female, undertook this purpose in all areas of public discourse, including scholarship (to which feminist receptions of epic are also related) and contemporary literature.³⁴

Epic myth and tradition was an obvious site at which to direct some of this revolutionary energy. The societies depicted in Homer and Virgil were stratified, callous and unjust by modern standards, and the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* are rife with depictions of bias, both subtle and blatant, suffered by slaves, non-human monsters, minor goddesses and aristocratic women, at the hands of ruling men. For example, Andromache was abandoned by Hector to her inevitable fate of grief and enslavement; Dido was deserted by Aeneas apparently without remorse; Polyphemus was blinded by Odysseus with cruel satisfaction;

³¹ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 27.

³² First- and second-wave feminism, and other twentieth-century liberation movements, had a related and combined effect. The poetic mode of 'democratic revision' arose among many of these causes simultaneously, and must be read as an act of democratisation in general, rather than just a feminist stance. For an excellent account charting the effects of feminist theory and politics on women's poetry, see Showalter (2009).

³³ Carton & Graff (1994), 325.

³⁴ Trends in academic research during this period were likewise shaped by social politics. In the field of Classics, Murnaghan & Roberts (2002) observe that once feminist criticism took hold in the universities, Penelope 'has come close to displacing Odysseus as the center of interest in recent scholarship on the *Odyssey*' (6). For bibliography on Penelope-centric criticism, and observations on how it relates to twentieth-century poetic practice, see Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 6, and Hurst (2009), 280. For a classic text on feminism and Classics, see Pomeroy (1975).

Circe was manipulated and her powers stunted by the same hero; obedient Penelope was praised and valued for her fidelity, but expected to forgive her philandering husband without a word; and the faithless maids were lynched in the courtyard. Although such imbalances and offenses were accepted, rationalised and defended for generations, later twentieth-century readers began to re-examine and denounce these now-distasteful facets of Homeric and Virgilian epic. For instance, Charles Boer, in a provocative foreword added to W.B. Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme* in 1992, expressed a starkly modern revulsion at the abusive gender roles embodied by Penelope and Odysseus:

What a perfect Roman Catholic fantasy Penelope is: faithful wife and mother and homemaker, martyred to a philandering, patriarchal, treacherous, property-obsessed husband – if only she'll put up with it for twenty years while he's off, he'll make it all right one day when he comes home. You bet. But so many feminists have already chewed on this piece of the Odysseus myth the bone is theirs. Do I hate him? Yes, dear reader, I agree with Achilles that Odysseus is as 'hateful as the gates of Hell.' [...] Achilles, the radical champion of ethical values in government, [should] be extolled over the team bully, the Mafia don, and the abusive husband.³⁵

Contrast this with Stanford's take on the fading Penelope in 1954:

The conventions of successive romantic eras in European literature, from the troubadours to the neo-Hellenists, have been hard on faithful Penelope. It would take a whole volume to free her from the accumulated disparagements of centuries. The gravest injustice is to compare her, after nineteen years of anxious waiting, burdened with the cares of a young son and an unruly household, with the carefree Nausicaa, Circe, and Calypso, or with the petted and wayward Helen. [...] But Homer presents real men and women, not dream-fantasies. He does not hesitate to reveal the ravages of her long vigil.³⁶

Doherty represents the clear-headed and resolute approach of feminist criticism to ancient epic:

Can't we enjoy and celebrate the formal beauty of the poem, or the *metis* of its hero, without taking a political stand? I would argue that ultimately we cannot, because the *Odyssey* itself has a political dimension. If we simply affirm the value of the poem without examining that dimension, we risk ratifying the status hierarchies, including gender and class hierarchies, which the poem embodies. If that is what we want and mean to do, well and good; but I for one do *not* wish to validate those hierarchies. So I use narratology not simply as an end in itself but also as a means to understand the workings of ideology.³⁷

Modern American poets use the reception practice of lyric revision in the same way.

³⁵ Boer (1992), viii.

³⁶ Stanford (1954), 55.

³⁷ Doherty (2001), 127.

Re-forming the Canon: Gender and Genre

That the mores of societies within epic narratives clashed with modern feminist goals and sensibilities explains in part the widespread impulse toward revisionist receptions in the U.S. in the twentieth century. Another possible cause of this popular focus on updating the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* is the attention brought by feminist and democratising politics to the genre of epic, and the gender dynamics that relate to its place in the canon of Western literature. In a number of ways that became unavoidable with the onset of second-wave feminism, classical epic epitomises masculine privilege and control, in contrast to feminine exclusion and passivity.

For most of its long history, the genre was restricted to male writers, subjects and to a certain extent audience and readers, who were afforded greater access to ancient texts through formal and exclusive education.³⁸ As Doherty demonstrates convincingly, the Homeric poet favours his hero Odysseus as co-storyteller, but suppresses any would-be female narrators throughout the poem:

My research convinces me that Odysseus and the epic narrator of the *Odyssey* are being presented as reliable narrators. Moreover, they reinforce each other's authority, since Odysseus is described as a skilled bard, and himself praises the performances of other bards within the poem. The epic narrator even allows his hero to take over the narration of one-fourth of the poem [Books 9-12]. [...] When compared with male narrators, the females tend to be portrayed as more dangerous, and the stories they tell are contained within larger narrative frameworks that do not allow them the last word,³⁹

for instance in the case of Circe, who only ever speaks through the voice of Odysseus, relating the tale of their encounter. Homer's disavowal of a female bard is seen to have discouraged generations of prospective female writers (who were silenced and self-silenced by traditional expectations),⁴⁰ and still possibly affects literary criticism, with a legacy of 'categorical statements about the absence of female authors from the epic tradition'.⁴¹

³⁸ On the essential conservatism of the classics in educational environments (male scholars and students, studying texts by male authors, about societies with male citizenry), see Rabinowitz & Richlin (1993), 3ff.

³⁹ Doherty (2001), 123-4 and 130.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gilbert & Gubar (1979) on the 'profoundly debilitating' 'anxiety of authorship' that afflicted female writers before the twentieth century (3-104).

⁴¹ Schweizer (2006), 2.

Furthermore, epic from its earliest emergence was ‘centrally concerned with men’.⁴² As Alison Keith observes, ‘The Homeric poet in his own voice [...] defines the subject of epic song as the “famous exploits of men” (*klea andron*, *Il.* 9.189, 524, *Od.* 8.73), a gender-specific interpretation of the genre echoed by poets and critics for millennia’.⁴³ When women did feature as the subject of epic, they were almost always secondary (as helpers or muses) or objectified (as obstacles or love-objects).⁴⁴ Hurst puts this grievance succinctly: ‘The woman poet wants to be the lover, the singer, but tradition places her as the beloved, the song’.⁴⁵

In addition, Homer and Virgil are read as sources of ancient mythology more generally, and so the epics were included in a wider feminist project of the late twentieth century: ‘revisionist mythmaking’,⁴⁶ an undertaking by women writers to rewrite classical myth in general, to include and reflect female perspectives and experiences. The consciousness and seriousness of purpose that defined these efforts is evident in a now-famous essay by American feminist poet Adrienne Rich, ‘Writing as Re-Vision’, from which I take the title of this chapter. In it she defines the process by which disenfranchised, especially female, poets enter into the poetic tradition: ‘Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival’.⁴⁷ The original male-created and male-centric mythologies that Western civilisation had relied on for inspiration and guidance were ‘no longer sufficient’ for an awakened, increasingly liberal society, with growing female leadership and agency.⁴⁸ As Elizabeth Dodd explained, ‘the vast body of existent mythology is shaped by – and helps to perpetuate the shape of – an order that has

⁴² Keith (2000), 1.

⁴³ Keith (2000), 1-2.

⁴⁴ On which, see Schweizer (2006), 1 and 3.

⁴⁵ Hurst (2009), 280.

⁴⁶ Scholar-poet Alicia Ostriker (1986) coined the phrase ‘revisionist mythmaking’, and defined it as ‘a vigorous and varied invasion of the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for “male” and “female” are themselves preserved. Where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit [...] as] a means of redefining both woman and culture’ (211).

⁴⁷ Rich (1979), quoted in Ostriker (1986), 235

⁴⁸ Doherty (2009), 198. See Staley (2009), 7-17, on the deep male focus of traditional mythology.

been largely hostile and oppressive toward women'.⁴⁹ Doherty elaborates on the crucial need to break story patterns, in order to enable new possibilities to be realised in the world:

My own sense of who I am is shaped not merely by my personal history, but by the possibilities held out to me by the society in which I live. While stories lack the overt coercive power of institutions like courts and corporations, they provide models or templates of behaviour that may be all the more powerful for being internalized and even unconscious. *Traditional* stories and story patterns are especially important models, since whatever attractions ensured their survival in the first place are combined with the authority of age and social approval.⁵⁰

For true shifts in gender roles to occur and take root in the modern United States, the old restrictive myths had to be upended and replaced. Democratic revisions of epic participate in this wider feminist project.

All of these restrictive qualities and masculine strongholds combined to make the epic genre a uniquely prominent site for reform in twentieth-century American poetry. The overwhelming solution, exemplified by the many progressive poems cited in this chapter, was to 'lyricise' the traditional form, which accomplished subversion on a number of levels.⁵¹ First of all, by presenting epic subjects in lyric poems, feminist and liberal-minded poets appeal to the modern literary tastes for personal access. In contrast to Homeric and Virgilian characterisation (which is relatively formal, surface-level and impersonal), lyric poetry provides unbroken focus on the individual, an inward, contemplative direction that often reveals deeply intimate concerns.⁵² By rewriting Homer and Virgil as short poems that answer the specific modern preference for human realism in literature, feminist poets are, in a sense, 'popularising' epic, making it accessible and engaging for all readers, not just classically

⁴⁹ Dodd (1992), 23.

⁵⁰ Doherty (2001), 118.

⁵¹ There is also an historical trend noted in scholarship, of early modern female poets invoking Homer (the font of Western canonicity) and epic (the 'highest' and most 'legitimate' literary genre) to gain authority for their work, and another related practice of inhabiting mythical characters as lyric 'masks', behind which they may safely speak with immodest frankness in an era of strict propriety. These dynamics were particularly prominent in the early twentieth century, among female contemporaries of the Modernists, as Dodd (1992) explored thoroughly. These poets 'coming from what some might see as the "margins" [seem ...] to be laying claim to a share of the dominant cultural authority of the "centre"' (Martindale (1997), 1). However, this chapter is concerned less with the legitimising functions of Homeric-Virgilian allusion, and more with the subversive possibilities of reducing epic into lyric.

⁵² In this sense it relates to the genre of the novel. On the contrast between personal access in epic versus lyric, as a point of entry by which modern poets may be drawn into adding to ancient texts, see Doherty (2009), 184.

educated men.⁵³ Furthermore, the shift in genre – ‘reducing’ famed epics into short, personal, revisionist poems – subverts male authority by interrupting the teleological continuity of the epic text and of the epic tradition, by interjecting uninvited, uninhibited, often female (or at least marginal) voices and text-fragments into the previously impermeable, hallowed, male canon. Murnaghan and Roberts explain the significance of this act of generic disturbance:

As a mode of rewriting, the selective retelling of lyric makes possible a challenge to Homer, a criticism, even a replacement. Lyric’s dissolution of narrative becomes the means by which these poets avoid or counter Homer’s privileging of [e.g.] Odysseus’ interests and the interests of others who share his gender, status, and time of life.⁵⁴

Finally, by acting upon epic texts through lyric means, feminist poets assert and reclaim for the ‘feminine’ lyric genre the power that ‘masculine’ epic had perhaps taken for granted in its long history of dominance: ‘The affinities between what [modern poets] choose to foreground and Homer chooses to downplay return us to the issue of genre and to lyric’s ability to remember what epic forgets’,⁵⁵ to defy censorship, selectivity and narrative gaps in the story, to insinuate itself into the holes and to hold the original texts – and their male characters, authors and guardians – to account.

The demographics of poets engaged in this reception practice, of lyricising epic to include marginalised female perspectives, are quite narrow: such poems appear to be written mostly by highly educated and politically liberal poets, perhaps because they possessed a certain balance between knowledge of the epics through university courses, and objection to the unjust circumstances depicted therein. Doherty suggests that affluence is another quality among this group of writers.⁵⁶ In terms of gender, most critics conclude that the feminist

⁵³ By aspiring to a wide readership, these poems allow their female speakers to transcend the limitations of feminine narration in Homer. Doherty (1995) observed that, ‘in contrast to the male storytellers [of the *Odyssey*], many of whom address large audiences, all the female narrators but three address only individual male listeners’ (85). She specified in a footnote: ‘The three exceptions are Helen in Book 4 (235-64), Arete in Book 11 (336-41) and Penelope, when she addresses the assembled Suitors in Book 21 (68-79). [...] I count a total of thirteen female narrators whose direct speech to individual males is reported. These include Athena, Penelope, Eurykleia, Helen, Eidothea, Kalypso, Ino, Nausikaa, Kirke, Antikleia, the nymph Lampetie, Eumaios’ Phoenician nurse, and the slave Melantho’. Modern lyric poems in the voice of epic women, by contrast, are published for wide circulation, and thus address their ‘speech’ to a diverse and potentially vast contemporary audience.

⁵⁴ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 26-7.

⁵⁵ Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 27.

⁵⁶ She observes: ‘I should note that the figure of Penelope has appealed primarily to white women poets of middle-class background and heterosexual orientation. It may seem obvious that this should be so, since Penelope’s dilemma is that of a privileged heterosexual woman, and since knowledge of the

mode is not exclusively female, that both men and women ‘receive’ epic in this way, and without substantial differences in their practice. I agree that male and female poets of the past century are both involved in the feminist revision of epic, but I have found at least one clear distinction between their reception practices, as I will seek to demonstrate in the remaining sections of this chapter.

The quality or validity of this category of feminist receptions has sometimes been made light of. The poet Linda Pastan wrote, in introducing her essay on receptions of Penelope: ‘A teacher I admire complained to me recently that contemporary writers seem to feel obliged to besmirch *The Odyssey* with cynical reinterpretations. I’ve given this a fair amount of thought since I suspect I am one of the writers she means’.⁵⁷ Although poems in this vein are certainly of varying aesthetic interest, they all participate in a transgressive act, trespassing into a male genre with seemingly innocuous ‘feminine’ lyric steps, only to uproot and transform it vigorously, and would once have seemed shocking, innovative and bold.⁵⁸ That they now strike readers *en masse* as a bit obvious, repetitive and even dated is perhaps in part because the democratising, revisionist mode naturally proliferated and diffused throughout American culture, being adopted over time by less passionate, serious or radical writers as a loosely political gesture of modern inclusiveness, equality and decency (in short, American ‘political correctness’), until the approach became a bit lacklustre and stale. As Showalter explains:

Poetry was among the genres losing its cultural ground and emotional grip. From the ladies’ annuals of the 1850s to the defiant declarations of the 1960s, poetry had once spoken directly to the hearts of women readers and carried the searing messages of revolutionary social change. But by the 1990s, there seemed to be many more women writing or teaching poetry than reading or buying it. Poetry in general had moved into the academy. [...] The era when women’s poetry was urgent and shattering, the blood jet, as Sylvia Plath had called it, seemed past.⁵⁹

classical tradition is more readily available to people of the middle and upper classes’ (Doherty (2009), 239).

⁵⁷ Pastan (1989), 273.

⁵⁸ One can imagine W.H. Auden reacting with horror to the brazenly defiant works of Adrienne Rich later in her career, of whom he wrote, in his foreword to her first published volume in 1951: ‘[The poems are] neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs’. Quoted in Showalter (2009), 411.

⁵⁹ Showalter (2009), 494.

Such bland poems, ostensibly in the feminist mode but without its original depth of rage and sorrow, do appear in my catalogue and footnotes, but are not quoted in the pages that follow. I have decided instead to focus on works that represent the general tenor of their type (e.g. depicting Circe as powerless human, Penelope as flawed artist), but that also vibrate with a profound pathos or capacity for vengeance, such that they fully embody their historical moment, and count among epic receptions of lasting interest. Most such efforts, perhaps unsurprisingly, were written by women, and often by outspoken or strongly identified feminists. Even if, as Dodd predicted, ‘the literary distinction between genders will fade’ before long, as ‘historical impediments drop away from the lives of women writers’, and even if gender activism therefore never again shapes such a resonant bulk of receptions of Homer and Virgil, these poems form an essential, and moving, moment in the history of American literature, and in the history of epic reception, and should be remembered.

Approaching the ‘Monsters’: Revisions of Calypso, Circe and the Sirens

The close readings of this chapter explore dynamics of power and gender in lyric poems focalized through prominent characters of the *Odyssey*: first of all, the misinterpreted ‘monsters’ Calypso, Circe and the Sirens, female ‘obstacles’ that threaten to obstruct the hero’s homecoming; and then, the inextricably linked pair Penelope and Odysseus, whose marriage, and the balance of power within it, is the single most popular subject for epic reception in modern American poetry. Although most scholars are careful not to delimit reception practices too cleanly along gender lines,⁶⁰ I believe that there are clear and important differences in the revisionist methods of male and female poets in relation to these

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Doherty (2009), who writes of artistic sameness despite gender difference: ‘A number of American men have also used the figure of Penelope in their poetry, and some have engaged in exchanges with women poets on the topic, suggesting that this mythic figure has a continued fascination for both genders’. She reiterates this blurring of gender distinctions in a footnote: ‘All of these recent male poets, like the women who are the focus of my study, acknowledge a sense of estrangement on Penelope’s part, and most are pessimistic about the possibility of reunion between husband and wife’ (181).

figures, and that divergent approaches emerge from, and interact with, one another in a connected pattern of literary and political shifts throughout the twentieth century.

Gendered additions to the *Odyssey* share an overt emphasis on power as a matter of negotiation, an ambiguous social construct rather than an innate right (as for a male hero) or a magical threat (as for a female sorceress). This body of poems is concerned throughout with the definition, (re)allocation, (mis)use and redress of power (agency, authority, autonomy) between men and women, as characters and as artists. In focalizing through the supernatural women Calypso, Circe and the Sirens, and the idealised housewife Penelope, twentieth-century female poets participate in the difficult process of revising the narrow depictions of women in literature written by men. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explained: 'Just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*', of women in general.⁶¹ Rather than allowing in their work the complexity of character and variety of personality that exists in reality, male writers (especially before the mid-twentieth century) instead divided female characters into starkly opposing and strictly controlled types, above all the familiar dichotomy between 'angel' and 'monster'. Gilbert and Gubar articulated the widely accepted terms of this classification:

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, [...] she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her 'inconstancy' and – by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented – to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically, as we will try to show here, a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must 'kill' the 'angel in the house'. In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity. [...] The images of 'angel' and 'monster' have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women's writing to such an extent that few women have definitely 'killed' either figure. Rather, the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly.⁶²

⁶¹ Gilbert & Gubar (1979), 50. On Bloom's theory of 'revisionary swerves', see Chapter 6 of this thesis.

⁶² Gilbert & Gubar (1979), 17, quoting Woolf from 'Professions for Women' in *The Death of the Moth and other Essays*.

Feminist poems focalized through epic women undertook to succeed in this project, of ‘killing’ the cold models of the monster and the angel, by complicating underdeveloped epic characters and adding more nuanced female perspectives to the tradition. It is a collective effort, each small poem contributing one more blow against the false icons. Male poets in the second half of the century (especially during the second feminist wave, in the 1960s and 1970s) also wrote poems expressing sympathy toward these one-dimensional, repressed figures (though often with less overt focus on renegotiating the power balance between hero and subordinate), seemingly having joined in the feminist impulse. By contrast, early twentieth-century male poets, writing before the emergence of prominent feminist discourse, presented versions of epic female characters that adhered remarkably closely to the stereotypes: disparaging poems about the wicked ‘monsters’ impeding the hero’s journey, and admiring and patronising poems about the ‘angel’ waiting faithfully at home.⁶³

Although male poets might intend and defend such poems as mere exercises in colourful adaptation (Charles Segal, for instance, declared that poets like Virgil and Ovid reworked ‘the legend of Circe, [because,] with its elements of love, witchcraft, strange and remote places, [it] offered a rich field for the display of poetic talents’),⁶⁴ female poets of the twentieth century appear to have read between the lines of such receptions, seeing back through the whole arc of limiting female characterisation in the epic tradition, and reacted against it by humanising these characters in their own lyric poems.

The most common approach to the ‘monster’ types in revolutionary female responses is a diminution or ‘naturalising’ of the character’s power: the threatening capacities of Calypso, Circe and the Sirens attributed in epic (and other masculine texts) to dark and mysterious magic are, in modern American feminist versions, explained as the effect of natural forces (sexual desire, human sloth), or revealed to be absent, incomplete or ineffectual in crucial ways.

⁶³ For examples, see the footnotes in the pages that follow. Mid-century scholarship also reflected this male categorisation of Calypso (e.g.) and Penelope as clear-cut oppositional types. See, for instance, Reinhardt (1960): ‘An *Odyssey* starting with Calypso, in which there had not been a word about Penelope before: wouldn’t there be something missing from Calypso’s grotto in such a telling? Would she not cease to be what she after all must be, a counterpart?’ (232).

⁶⁴ Segal (1968), 419.

The earliest feminist poem of this sort in my catalogue is H.D.'s sorrowful lyric 'Circe' (1921),⁶⁵ spoken through the voice of the goddess herself. A leader in the *avant-garde* Imagist movement in the early twentieth century,⁶⁶ H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) explored the many sorrows of her life (infidelity, war trauma, miscarriage) through mythical models, and is now considered to be an early prototype of revisionist mythology as an outlet for female doubts and protests about the world.⁶⁷ Murnaghan explains:

Mythological revision [...] remains one of H.D.'s main poetic legacies. H.D. made myths her own, not only to use them as vehicles for her own experience, but also to rewrite them: she both embraced myths for their correspondences to what she knew in her own life and reinvented them to make them more responsive to her hard-won knowledge of varied forms of sexuality, of the pain of abandonment, and of the devastating effects of patriarchal, militaristic culture. In this respect, H.D. stands as an influential precursor for the many women writers who, from the mid-twentieth century on, have retold myths from the perspectives of women and other marginalized figures, articulating perspectives and values that are not fully explored in the male-authored versions we have inherited from antiquity.⁶⁸

In revising epic into lyric, H.D. clearly had a feminising bent, indicated by her comments on genre in her autobiographical novel *Paint It Today*:

Large, epic pictures bored her, though she struggled through them. She wanted the songs that cut like a swallow-wing the high, untainted ether, not the tragic legions of set lines that fell like black armies with terrific force and mechanical set action, paralyzing, or broke like a black sea to baffle and to crush.⁶⁹

This feminist intention is patently evident in 'Circe', which in six short stanzas shatters any narrow and negative assumptions about the goddess ingrained from Homer and

⁶⁵ H.D. (1921). For readings of 'Calypso', H.D.'s other revision of a Homeric 'monster' (which was originally entitled 'Callypso Speaks', clearly indicating its endeavour of 'giving voice'), see Murnaghan (2009), 73, and S.F. Friedman (1981) *Psyche Reborn*, 236-43.

⁶⁶ Friedman (1972) described the vision and import of H.D.'s poetic approach: 'Sparse in words, harsh in vision, H.D.'s Imagist poems crystallized intense emotion and sexual passion into the stark sea-roses, dazzling fires, and white-washed marble of her poetic discourse. Often mistaken for objectivist nature poetry, H.D.'s Imagist lyric was a celebration of the wild and the stark that encoded her rebellion against the cloying femininity of her Victorian upbringing' (212). H.D.'s epic receptions all reflect this stark aesthetic, and include 'Odyssey' (among translations, 1915-1920), 'Thetis' (1921), 'Cuckoo Song' (1921), 'The Islands' (1921), 'Sea Heroes' (1921), 'Prayer' (1921), 'Helios' (1921), 'At Ithaca' (1924), 'Calypso' (among unpublished poems, 1912-1944), *Helen in Egypt* (1961) and 'Winter Love' (published posthumously, 1972).

⁶⁷ H.D. (1886-1961) was an important American poet associated with the innovative Imagist movement of the early twentieth century. She was mentored by (and engaged to) Ezra Pound early in her career, and undertook psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud in the 1930s to make sense of her bisexuality. H.D. lived much of her adult life abroad, and had a deep personal fascination with classical mythology and its capacity to illuminate personal experience, a dynamic that has an indelible presence in her lyric poems. For further details about her life, and especially her relationship with ancient literature, see Gregory (1997).

⁶⁸ Murnaghan (2009), 72.

⁶⁹ Friedman (1972), 214, quoting H.D. (1921) *Paint It Today*, 37.

later male receptions.⁷⁰ Far from being an ‘inhuman and predatory’ witch,⁷¹ in the male view, H.D.’s Circe is practically mortal: romantically vulnerable, and powerless to achieve the goal that matters most to her. The poem begins with the goddess mourning the departure of her lover Odysseus:

It was easy enough
to bend them to my wish,
it was easy enough
to alter them with a touch,
but you
adrift on the great sea,
how shall I call you back? (stanza 1)

She has been abandoned, despite her apparent ‘powers’: ‘all of my sea-magic is for nought’ (stanza 2). In fact, her abilities are far less magical than tradition avows. Rather, Circe guides men along the path of their own desires to attain their true form:

It was easy enough –
a thought called them
from the sharp edges of the earth;
they prayed for a touch,
they cried for the sight of my face,
they entreated me
till in pity
I turned each to his own self. (stanza 3)

These lines ‘naturalise’ her magic, linking it implicitly to physical urges and repressed identity: by begging her for release and understanding, these men are implicated in their own transformation (not subjected to an unexpected trick (*δόλον*, *Od.* 10.232) perpetrated against them in ignorance (*ἀϊδρείησιν*, *Od.* 10.257)), and she is hardly dreadful (*δεινή*, *Od.* 10.136) for granting their wish.⁷² Having assumed their beast-shapes, the creatures

⁷⁰ As Segal (1968) observed, any realism and ambiguity present in Circe, in Homer’s portrayal, was edited out in later iterations: Virgil focused entirely on her dreadful divinity; Ovid highlighted her unruly passion; and most artists until the twentieth-century used her as an allegory for the dangers of human sexuality.

⁷¹ Stanford (1954), 48.

⁷² Stanford (1954) explained the origins of this symbolic understanding of Circe’s ‘powers’: ‘[Circe is] a luminous daemonic creature combining two equally dangerous but quite dissimilar personalities. As the sister of Aietes she turns men into swine; as a daughter of the Sun she delights them with every sensuous joy. It was left to later allegorists to assert that these were two ways of saying the same thing: the sensual man is the swinish man’ (46). For other statements of the same observation in criticism, see Ostriker (1986), 222, and Brilliant (1995), 165, 167. For other poems (feminist and traditional) that ‘naturalise’ Circe’s power in this way, see Raymond Holden (1922); William Gibson ‘Circe’ (1949); Richard Selig ‘The Island: November’ (1962); Alan Dugan ‘At Circe’s Place’ (1973); Olga Broumas ‘Circe’ (1977); Jack Gilbert ‘The Plundering of Circe’ (1982); Linda Pastan ‘Circe’ (1988); Diann Blakely ‘Circe’ (1992); and Louise Glück ‘Circe’s Power’ (1996). The brilliant ‘Circe/Mud Poems’ (1976) by Canadian poet Margaret Atwood also participates in this revision of Circe into a

cover the sea-sound
with their throats,
and the sea-roar with their own barks
and bellowing and snarls,
and the sea-stars
and the swirl of the sand,
and the rock-tamarisk
and the wind resonance –
but not your voice. (stanza 4)

These lines, and indeed the poem as a whole, are repetitive and incantatory, like an enchantress's spell – or like the rambling thoughts of a bereaved human mind. Having disavowed her supernatural abilities, this Circe then recounts her actual gifts, the blessings and splendours of her world:

it is beautiful to see the tall panther
and the sleek deer-hounds
circle in the dark.
It is easy enough
to make cedar and white ash fumes
into palaces
and to cover the sea-caves
with ivory and onyx. (stanza 5)

These lines rewrite Homer (whose house of polished stone on a wide outlook (τετυγμένα δώματα Κίρκης/ ξεστοῖσιν λάεσσι, περισκεπτῶ ἐνὶ χώρῳ, *Od.* 10.210-11) becomes coastal 'sea-caves' tiled 'with ivory and onyx', and whose wolves and lions (λύκοι and λέοντες, *Od.* 10.212) become 'the tall panther/ and the sleek deer-hounds') to suit H.D.'s artistic inclination for stark wildness.⁷³ The final stanza discloses a wretched twist:

But I would give up
rock-fringes of coral
and the inmost chamber
of my island palace
and my own gifts
and the whole region
of my power and magic
for your glance. (stanza 6)

Even this woman's true gifts – her animal companions, her decorated halls and her ability to help men realize their deepest nature – are a willing price for the thing she really wants: to have her love returned. Far from being a cold, conniving force causing pain to men while

complicated, vulnerable being. For one-dimensional male versions condemning Circe's fearsome, female powers, see Frederick Prokosch 'Sunburned Ulysses' (1940); William Gibson 'Circe' (1949); and Alan Dugan 'At Circe's Place' (1973).

⁷³ That H.D. was working from the Greek seems likely. Gregory (1997), for instance, cross-referenced this poem with *Od.* 10.210-219, and observed in a footnote that 'H.D.'s copy of the Greek text of Books 1-12 of the *Odyssey* is in the H.D. library at Yale' (279).

herself unscathed (Stanford called her a ‘sinister automaton’ and a frightening foreshadowing of ‘the robot-like figures of modern scientific fiction’),⁷⁴ this Circe is acutely attuned to feeling, completely ‘complicit in the dynamics of desire’.⁷⁵ She is motivated only by the genuine pain of longing, and bargains fancifully with the universe (all my riches for my lover’s glance), in the humble and unqualified way that a mortal woman would.

In Maura Stanton’s poem ‘A Voice for the Sirens’ (from her volume *Snow on Snow*, which won the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1975),⁷⁶ another Homeric ‘monster’ is shown to be less terrifying and more pitiable than the masculine tradition suggests. Doherty noted that, although the encounter between Odysseus and the Sirens (*Od.* 12.184-91) lasts a mere 35 lines (exceedingly brief in an epic of 12,110), it has an outsized presence in later literature: ‘The evocative power of the passage [...] seems to stand in inverse proportion to its length’.⁷⁷ Stanford called the episode ‘one of the most famous stories in European literature, and a rich source of allegorical and symbolical interpretations’.⁷⁸

One of these readings is that the Sirens’ song represents the dangerous allure of knowledge (promising to tell Odysseus ‘all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth’, ὄσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πολυβοτείρη, *Od.* 12.191) – a temptation that he resists, but which is generally understood to lead to a calamitous end, for instance in the story of Adam and Eve.⁷⁹ The ‘power’ of the Sirens has also been understood to signify the dangers of female narration. In the *Odyssey*, their voice is identified unmistakably (*Od.* 12.187) as the στόμα of epic poetry – the same ‘voice’ ascribed to male narrators in the *Iliad*. Pietro Pucci explained this linguistic connection:

We note the extraordinary precision of the expression ἀπὸ στομάτων. For στόμα in Homer is rarely connected with the production of the voice, *glōssa* being used to denote the source of the voice (see, for instance, *Il.*I.249 [...]). Yet στόμα is connected with the voice 4 times: 3

⁷⁴ Stanford (1954), 48.

⁷⁵ Gregory (1997), 174.

⁷⁶ Stanton (1975). Maura Stanton (1946-) is a Midwestern American poet with an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She has taught creative writing at a number of U.S. colleges, most recently Indiana University. Her published work includes two other receptions of the *Odyssey*, ‘Proteus’s Tale’ (also from *Snow on Snow*, 1975), and ‘Autumn in the Land of the Lotus Eaters’ (from *Cries of Swimmers*, 1984).

⁷⁷ Doherty (1995), 81.

⁷⁸ Stanford (1954), 77.

⁷⁹ See Germain (1962) for the link between the Sirens episode, and the temptation of knowledge in world literature.

times in the *Iliad* and only once in the *Odyssey*, in the song of the Sirens. The analysis of the Iliadic passages is rewarding, for in *Il.* II.489, στόμα is used by the poet to indicate his own mouth as producing the song, while in *Il.* II.250 and XIV.91 this word is used by Odysseus,⁸⁰

to refer to male speakers (first Thersites, then men in general). So by choosing this word to refer to their song, the Sirens mark themselves as serious, masculine narrators. Because of this posturing (as it might seem to the men), their speech is severely truncated and discredited. As Doherty explains:

The Sirens are perhaps the most obvious and extreme example of female narrators whose voice must be cut off or at least ignored lest they cause the destruction of the male hero. Not only is their direct speech limited to eight lines, but Odysseus is put on his guard against them and given elaborate instructions for avoiding their snares by Circe, herself a formerly dangerous goddess who has been converted into a helper.⁸¹

The ‘destruction’ that they threaten is, of course, the grisly death that befalls wayward sailors who do not resist their magnetism (forewarned by Circe at *Od.* 12.44-6); but also narrative overthrow, the interruption and replacement of the story of the principal men, by rogue female singers. Doherty (in a different essay) described this twofold risk:

The Sirens episode distills in a particularly potent set of images the dynamics of male-female interaction that prevail in the *Odyssey*. Insofar as female figures constitute a series of threats or false goals for the male hero, the Sirens, like Kalypso and Kirke, must be relegated to the margins of the human world and resisted with all available means. Yet because the Sirens also represent the lure of poetry, indeed *epic* poetry, their power is intertwined with that of the *Odyssey* itself. For this reason Odysseus must desire to hear them and must inspire his own audience with the same desire. Their female power must be contained so that Odysseus may achieve his homecoming; their narrative power must be contained so that the *Odyssey* may run its course.⁸²

Modern poets likewise exaggerated the potency and the horror of the Sirens.⁸³ In most critical and poetic interpretations, then, these female ‘monsters’ are endowed with immense power and significance, bearing the weight of numerous significant threats, on the back of just a few short lines of text.

⁸⁰ Pucci (1998), 2.

⁸¹ Doherty (2001), 131.

⁸² Doherty (1995), 81-2.

⁸³ For examples of male receptions focused on the frightening power of the Sirens, see William Alexander Percy ‘Siren Song’ (1924); Frederic Prokosch ‘Sunburned Ulysses’ (1940); Horace Gregory ‘A Temptation of Odysseus’ (1951); and Donald Finkel ‘The Sirens’ (1957). For feminist (both male and female) responses naturalising and softening their image, see Mekeel McBride ‘Odysseus and the Sirens’ (1979); Linda Pastan ‘The Sirens’ (1988); Louise Glück ‘Siren’ (1996); and Reginald Shepherd ‘Odysseus Becalmed’ (1996).

In fact, Stanton's feminist reception suggests, these iconic, terrifying symbols of menacing femininity are actually just sad, tawdry, literal monsters. 'A Voice for the Sirens' begins:

Oh they came, their eyes blank.
I pinned their souls under rocks
wanting only their shocked flesh [...] (stanza 1)

The first line seems to respond to an implicit question: 'What actually happened?' or 'Who are you, really?', to which the Siren perks up with surprise at being asked ('Oh'), and then tells the real story. She, at least, does not seek deep, total or metaphysical satisfaction from the men she tempts, instead dispensing with their 'souls' and taking 'only their shocked flesh'. The pile of bones and shrivelled skin described in Homer is accurate, at least (*Od.* 12.45-6). The attribution of knowledge, however, is false. This Siren describes her own song:

Now I stare at the sea all day
singing about strange events
for I've passed through their souls
inadvertently, thinking them shadows –
their souls were particles of odd happenings
or geography or touch,
tainting my immorality with memory. (stanza 1)

This is not the 'clear-sounding song' recounted by Odysseus (λιγυρήν [...] ἀοιδήν, *Od.* 12.183), but rather a vague trance ('singing about strange events'), undertaken while staring into space, with unforeseen effects ('inadvertently' touching the innermost souls of the men who come near, not knowing what to make of their spiritual dimension ('odd happenings')). She senses that her killing is wrong ('my immorality'), but cannot quite grasp the pathos of the men she eats, even as they try to tell her in their death throes:

In this fairyland, their strenuous lips
only blub loosely like the octopus
crossing my feet with lank, amorous
tentacles; their fingers dissolve
into the sharp, familiar bone. (stanza 2)

The Siren perceives the dying men only physically, as 'strenuous lips' that 'blub loosely' like a nearby 'octopus', and soon as skeletal fingers, picked clean. She does not discern their words.

Stanton's version of the Sirens' song concludes piteously:

Sometimes I hear mariner's wives chanting

over the water, like us, forlorn;

Yet I keep singing, my dangerous voice
joined in sad irresponsibility with those
on this rock who forget why
each time until the next ship crashes.
Into the haunted music I weave my warning
carefully, as if my language were decipherable. (stanza 3)

There is irony in these lines, in phrases like ‘my dangerous voice’ and ‘I weave my warning/carefully’. In truth, although the Sirens’ animalistic lifestyle is distasteful (eating men without grasping their deeper consciousness or cosmic significance), they are essentially quite powerless, as this stanza confirms: they are ‘forlorn’ for being somewhat obtuse, isolated creatures perched in the middle of the sea, and perhaps also because generations of readers have misunderstood them. Their ‘language’ is not ‘decipherable’, and they can only pretend (‘as if’) to know what they sing. Their famous ‘music’ is not haunting by their own powers, but ‘haunted’ by the epic tradition, which imbues them with vastly more influence and menace than they actually possess, and thus restricts, resists and abuses them unduly.

Liberating the ‘Angel’: Female Versions of Penelope

The most well documented focus for epic revision in twentieth-century American poetry is the figure of Penelope, Odysseus’ steadfast wife, about whom both women and men have written dozens of lyric receptions.⁸⁴ Three capable, recent essays (Murnaghan and Roberts (2002), Hurst (2008) and Doherty (2009)) characterise trends among the most substantial and interesting of these versions, including poems by Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Katha Pollitt, Eleanor Wilner, Linda Pastan, Louise Glück, Cynthia MacDonald and Jorie Graham. These Penelope poems by female poets appear to evolve over time, as Doherty convincingly demonstrates, evidently the product of their shifting cultural moments. Doherty charts this proposed progression:

The earlier of these poets, including Dorothy Parker and Edna St Vincent Millay, explore the emotional suffering of a Penelope whose conventional marriage implies relative confinement

⁸⁴ For Penelope poems in my catalogue, see note 19 in this chapter.

for the wife and great freedom for the husband. This asymmetry of roles is not accepted, as it was in Homer, but seen as hurtful to the woman, whose obvious intelligence and aspirations are commensurate with her husband's. In particular, the stasis, both physical and emotional, in which she finds herself is contrasted with the mobility of Odysseus. The early poems explore this situation from Penelope's perspective, but without imagining an alternative. In the self-consciously feminist poems of Katha Pollitt and Eleanor Wilner, written in the 1970s and 80s, hurt is compounded with anger, and the Penelope figure – or a speaker sympathetic to her – contemplates new endings to her story. Finally, poets of the 1980s and 1990s describe Penelope explicitly as an artist, still identified with the roles of wife and mother but not limited by them. These most recent poems do not deny the potential for suffering in Penelope's situation; indeed, some of them insist that even her apparent happiness with Odysseus can only be 'a dream'. But they accord her the artist's freedom to make and unmake, as well as to provide the framing perspective that makes provisional sense of her experience.⁸⁵

In all of these versions, Penelope is emancipated in various ways from her faithful, patient servitude, and also made more human and multi-dimensional, granted the inquisitive voice, at times conflicting qualities and inevitable weaknesses of a full person or character. As these critics imply, the Penelope that emerges from these revisions is more modern in every regard – from her complexity and self-consciousness, to her independence and artistic ambition, to her lyric openness and rejection of epic strictures.

Murnaghan and Roberts, Hurst and Doherty suggest that modern poetic fascination with Penelope stems not only from her obvious appeal as a major female epic character, but also from her identity in Homer as a site of paradox, a union of oppositions, such as those that liberated women have struggled to balance within their own lives in the past century. The Homeric Penelope can be understood as simultaneously embodying wife versus artist, stagnation versus inspiration (growing old alone, but deftly weaving), constancy versus undoing (remaining faithful to her husband, but deceiving the suitors by unravelling her woven fabric every night), centrality versus marginality (serving as the goal, the end-point of the entire plot of the *Odyssey*, but remaining mostly 'off-stage' in the text), ideal femininity versus heroism (being sought and valued as the perfect wife, but exhibiting at times the independence and cunning of her famed husband).⁸⁶ Furthermore, twentieth-century feminist interest in Penelope is sparked above all by the subtle power that she wields. Despite being aggrieved and inhibited in many ways, she is, in fact, a strong literary model for the female artist, demonstrating the power of art, by using weaving 'to preserve her fidelity, by

⁸⁵ Doherty (2009), 187.

⁸⁶ See Foley (1978) on 'reverse similes' characterising Penelope as heroic and crafty.

defending herself against the suitors'.⁸⁷ Recent female Penelope poems react against traditional depictions of the character's powerlessness, waiting for male agency, instead endowing her with all the shades of modern femininity, including strengths (artistic prowess, above all) and robust, palpable flaws (loneliness, anger, boredom, lust, selfishness, contentment despite her husband's perilous absence and pride in her artistic creations). In this way, modern poets liberate and humanise the 'angel' of masculine literature.⁸⁸

In 1924, H.D. published 'At Ithaca',⁸⁹ one of the most heartbreaking and beautiful receptions of Penelope yet written, in my view. Inexplicably it has been overlooked by the three recent essays on Penelope poems, cited above, so I am glad for the chance to include it here. In Penelope's voice, and H.D.'s famously compressed but reverberating style, the poem begins:

Over and back,
the long waves crawl
and track the sand with foam;
night darkens and the sea
takes on that desperate tone
of dark that wives put on
when all their love is done. (stanza 1)

This stanza, echoing with rhymes crashing like waves at the end of the lines, establishes two stark realities straight away: Penelope's complexity of thought, and her lonely despair. This woman is not simple and pure, but troubled and symbolically minded, seeing in the ocean off the coast of Ithaca both the rhythmic movements of her own weaving ('over and back', the waves 'crawl' and 'track' patterns on the sand, as her deft hands do on fabric), and also the profound hopelessness ('that desperate tone/ of dark', a phrase that encapsulates both the roar of the waves and the deep colour of the waters) of her situation. Far from being content to

⁸⁷ Doherty (2009), 182.

⁸⁸ Penelope as 'angel' appears in my catalogue in Edgar Lee Masters 'Ulysses' (1921), and Raymond Holden 'Calypso' (1922). The exception to this 'angel' pattern is a discrete, minor tradition, of male poets who appear to work from *Od.* 5.215-224, a short speech in which Odysseus admits to Calypso that his wife is less beautiful and more frail in her mortality than the ageless goddess. Tennyson in 'Ulysses' (1833), for instance, wrote of the hero as 'an idle king,/ By this still hearth, among these barren crags,/ Matched with an aged wife' (lines 1-3); and Archibald MacLeish in 'Calypso's Island' (1962) described the gloom of Penelope's inevitable decline: 'For unlike you she will grow grey, grow older,/ Grey and older, sleep in that small room' (stanza 2). Although this focus on Penelope's fading beauty does not technically cast her as an 'angel', it is objectionable to feminists in another way: by focusing solely and disparagingly on her physical appearance, it reduces her to an unwanted object.

⁸⁹ H.D. (1924).

wait patiently for her husband's uncertain return, and delay the suitors with her weaving-unweaving trick, this Penelope feels wide-ranging despair, her unhappiness seeping into every thought and scene: she cannot look at the ocean without finding in it an image of her own desolation.

Being abandoned is not her only misery, however. H.D.'s human Penelope also fights against her own errant urges:

My weary thoughts
play traitor to my soul
just as the toil is over;
swift while the woof is whole,
turn now my spirit, swift,
and tear the pattern there,
the flowers so deftly wrought,
the border of sea-blue,
the sea-blue coast of home. (stanza 3)

This woman is not immutable (like a static icon), but changing, growing 'weary', reaching the end of her project ('the toil is over') and feeling tempted to embrace the shift, despite her purer instincts ('My weary thoughts/ play traitor to my soul'). She does not unweave her work blithely or automatically, but reluctantly, with emotional exertion, urging herself to do the right thing: 'swift while the woof is whole,/ turn now my spirit, swift,/ and tear the pattern there'. Part of her hesitation is an attachment to the beautiful scenes she has created,⁹⁰ and the reminder they afford of beloved Odysseus:

The web was over-fair,
that web of pictures there,
enchantments that I thought
he had, that I had lost; (stanza 4)

But part is a less virtuous yearning for change, for an end to the stagnation of her life of weaving and unweaving in endless succession:

weaving his happiness
within the stitching frame,
weaving his fire and fame,

⁹⁰ Doherty (2009) writes, of Penelope's pride in her work: 'The exacting craft of weaving, associated in Homer with intelligence and practiced exclusively by women in the epic, provides a ready metaphor for the craft of women's poetry. (By contrast, among the Penelope poems I have found by men, relatively few use her weaving as a metaphor for the poet's own craft.) Although the Homeric text does not portray Penelope as valuing her weaving for its own sake, it is easy for modern women poets to imagine her doing so' (182). For epic weaving as an analogue for artistic creation among modern poets and critics, see Snyder (1980), Murnaghan & Roberts (2002), 6-7 and Hurst (2009). Cf. Circe's weaving at *Aen.* 7.14, considered a meta-poetic reference by Virgil to his revision (reweaving) of the Homeric text.

I thought my work was done,
I prayed that only one
of those that I had spurned,
might stoop and conquer this
long waiting with a kiss. (stanza 4)

In Homer, Penelope promises to choose a new husband from among the Suitors, once she finishes weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes (*Od.* 2.96-102, 19.123-63). Although this bargain is revealed to be disingenuous and wily in the original story (she 'fooled and convinced' them without hesitation, to preserve her husband's honour, *Od.* 2.106), H.D.'s Penelope admits that the situation is not so clear-cut. As this stanza reveals, her proposal may have served not only to trick the Suitors into respecting her chastity, but also to gratify her secret yearning to move on, to cease waiting endlessly for absent Odysseus and to indulge in the release (for her 'long waiting' to be ended 'with a kiss') of a new marriage. That she manages to sustain her deception and her abstinence is, she explains in this new version, not from her own perfection, but due to an external force:

But each time that I see
my work so beautifully
inwoven and would keep
the picture and the whole,
Athene steels my soul,
slanting across my brain,
I see as shafts of rain
his chariot and his shafts,
I see the arrows fall,
I see my lord who moves
like Hector, lord of love,
I see him matched with fair
bright rivals and I see
those lesser rivals flee. (stanza 5)

In *Odyssey* 19, Penelope tells disguised Odysseus that the initial idea (*πρῶτον*, *Od.* 19.138) to weave a shroud by day came from a god (*δαίμων*), but she depicts the ruse of unweaving by night as her own inspiration (*Od.* 19.148-51). This poem contradicts that account: 'each time' Penelope is inclined to 'keep' her weaving in its lovely finished state (and by implication fulfil her promise to marry again), she is visited by a divine strength (from the goddess 'Athene', who 'steels' her 'soul' against temptation). It is this superhuman force that causes her to unweave her work, not only her own volition. Furthermore, the unravelling fabric is depicted here as a lovely mirage of animation. As Penelope whips the threads backwards

from the loom, it creates an illusion of motion: arrows ‘fall’ from the sky; her husband ‘moves’ across the battlefield; and his ‘rivals flee’ before him, as they disintegrate from a static fabric picture into a heap of shifting fibres and strands. The poem ends on this suggestion, that even in fulfilling her duty, Penelope perceives in the dissolution of her work a conflicted aesthetic interest and beauty, rather than moral honour. This character is no ‘angel’ or flawless absolute, but a complex, artistic, human woman.

In another version from the opposite end of the century (‘To Penelope’ (2002)),⁹¹ Linda Pastan similarly emphasises Penelope’s human weaknesses, and her artistic nature.⁹² This character, Pastan suggests, is not selflessly patient, as tradition maintains, but rather selfish of her own privacy:

Let others applaud you
for what they call patience.
[...]
 you deserve applause.
For you are like a fine actress
who takes her bow modestly,
and no one would ever guess you were in love
with solitude. (lines 19-20, 23-7)

To illustrate this concealed pleasure, Pastan luxuriates in the sight of Penelope’s pristine bed:

 without the mess and bother
of a man, the sheets of your bed will remain
as white as the morning sands
after the sea has smoothed them. (lines 9-12)

The poet’s care with this image suggests that she understands the feeling, a woman’s guilty preference for solitude and spotlessness that a man disturbs, and does not judge this character for harbouring such imperfections. However, as if to absolve Penelope of her weakness and guide her toward her most authentic strength, Pastan’s narrator reminds her to appreciate her absent husband:

But never forget Odysseus.
Without him and his journey
the olive trees wouldn’t seem bent
in a passion of longing; your loom
would have stayed unstrung, its music

⁹¹ Pastan (2002).

⁹² Linda Pastan (1932-) is an award-winning American poet, known for her lyric work on domestic and personal themes. She was educated at Radcliffe College (A.B.) and Brandeis University (M.A.), and has written a number of compassionate receptions of marginalised epic characters, including ‘You are Odysseus’ (1975), ‘Rereading the Odyssey in Middle Age’ (1975), ‘Dido’s Farewell’ (1982), ‘The Sirens’ (1988) and ‘We Get What We Wish For at Our Peril’ (2002).

lost on a wind that never was.

[...]

But again, remember:
though he must come back at last,
though you must open your arms
which have grown strong alone at their weaving,
without Odysseus and his journey
there would be no tapestried story. (lines 13-18, 27-32)

In other words, male abuse (by ‘Odysseus’ and ‘his journey’ – her husband who left her, and later literature which withheld from her full expression and empathy), although it prompts imperfect introversion, also facilitates her truest power and fulfilment: her weaving, her ability to see the world imaginatively (‘the olive trees’ as if ‘bent/ in a passion of longing’), and to depict it throughout long, private years as unrivalled art (a ‘tapestried story’). Though she may resent Odysseus for certain understandable reasons, a twentieth-century Penelope must value him for one, at least: by creating a vacuum in her life, Odysseus inadvertently inspired her (muse-like) to transcend her roles as wife, mother, muse or ‘angel’, and become an artist – one of the most symbolic and memorable in modern Western literature.

Rehabilitating the ‘Hero’: Male Responses in the Feminist Mode

The inverse of the Penelope poems by female poets discussed above (in which narrow depictions are expanded, and the unjust conditions of the marriage are shown to result in artistic empowerment, despite, or even in part because of, her husband’s absence and abuse) are lyric poems by male poets of the late twentieth century, defending and redeeming the maligned hero. This group of short lyric additions to the *Odyssey* combine to defend, soften and complicate Odysseus’ image, making the adulterous, vengeful wanderer (from whom feminist revisions had sought extravagantly to rescue poor Penelope, Calypso, Circe and others) appear more sympathetic, self-aware and honourable by modern standards of gender ethics and political correctness.⁹³

⁹³ Examples of modern American male poets rehabilitating Odysseus include Mark Van Doren ‘Odysseus’ (1948); Archibald MacLeish ‘Calypso’s Island’ (1962); Donald Davidson ‘Old Sailor’s

‘Democratising’ poems of the past century (versions focalized through the many characters harmed or neglected by Odysseus) are hardly the first affront to the hero’s reputation. In fact, ‘Odysseus has been loathed or mistrusted for far longer in the [Western] tradition than he has been admired’.⁹⁴ Throughout his literary afterlife, diverse and substantial authors have called into question whether he qualifies as a ‘hero’ at all.⁹⁵ The major objection (through which his treatment of women, slaves, minor male companions, rivals and other marginalised characters can be understood, to an extent) is his fundamental deceitfulness.

Stephen Minta describes this misgiving on the part of readers:

The stratagem of the wooden horse and all that it signifies will place Odysseus at an angle to most subsequent phases of European culture. The idea that there is something unfair about the horse, as the means of winning an otherwise unwinnable conflict, lingers around the figure of Odysseus for much of his post-Homeric career.⁹⁶

The episode is perhaps the most memorable, but certainly not the only, occasion in the Homeric epics on which Odysseus is disposed to do whatever it takes to preserve himself and promote his goals, even if it means cheating on his wife or sacrificing his comrades to various agents of destruction, a moral relativism and self-centeredness that became obvious targets for modern feminists and liberals. Minta suggests, furthermore, that the process of ‘rehabilitating’ the shifty hero ‘from the Renaissance onwards’ was at first a matter of constricting him within more definite moral boundaries: ‘As he began to be rehabilitated in the European tradition, the price was a diminution of his range, an attempt to contain him within the bounds of what a polite society felt to be acceptable’.⁹⁷ In the twentieth-century U.S., however, this project took an opposite turn. Modern male poets did still participate in the rehabilitation of Odysseus by suiting him to the expectations of society; but the increasingly liberal atmosphere of late twentieth-century America (characterised and shaped by the prevalent feminist poems discussed in earlier sections of this chapter) demanded an

Choice’ (1962); Richmond Lattimore ‘Odysseus’ (1968); Carl Dennis ‘Ithaka’ (1979); Alan Shapiro ‘Calypso, Penelope’ (1996); and John McKernan ‘Certainly Odysseus Wept’ (1999).

⁹⁴ Minta (2007), 94.

⁹⁵ Among literary ‘moralists’ who mistrusted Odysseus, Boer (1992) listed Pindar, Hesiod, Socrates, Aeschylus, Euripides, Virgil and Seneca. His defenders included Ovid, the early Christians and Renaissance thinkers (xvi-xviii). See Stanford (1954), Chapters 7-12 on ‘Ulysses as a Figure of Controversy’.

⁹⁶ Minta (2007), 94.

⁹⁷ Minta (2007), 103, 97.

expansion, not a diminution, of Odysseus' self-focused, chauvinistic and traditional range.

This broadening involved, most strikingly, a move to 'feminise' the hero, to blur and dissolve the boundaries between his masculine legacy and new liberal-minded readers.

A mid-century example protecting Odysseus from condemnation by modernising him for a liberal audience, appears among the work of Mark Van Doren.⁹⁸ In his poem 'Odysseus' (1948), Van Doren generates layer upon layer of positive epithets, until the limits of the traditional, specific hero dissipate, leaving behind a transcendent presence. I reproduce the entire (short) poem here:

The broad-shouldered lord of rocky Ithaca,
Conqueror of brine, Athene's darling,
Listener to song and silent weeper
At his own name, Odysseus, loved himself
As the gods do, nor was it blasphemy.
The earth was in him, aching to be loved.

What man so happy, finding a sweet spring
Where nymphs hid and olive trees were old?
But it was blood to blood, as when his wrath
Sang swallow, and his bed postponed the dawn.
The pride of his own heart was strength's announcement;
Being in him boasted it was good.

The homecomer, shouting over waves
To the one world, his island, that it stand,
Even then was there; for all the globe
Rejoiced in him. Insulter of its giants,
Tamer of its sorcerers, he swam
Forgiven – greatness in him, and home ground.

This quite lovely, invigorating portrait combines traditional heroic descriptions ('broad-shouldered lord', 'the pride of his own heart', 'conqueror') with female, metaphysical suggestions of Odysseus' connectedness ('The earth was in him, aching to be loved'), omnipresence ('The homecomer [...] / Even then was there; for all the globe / Rejoiced in him') and even godlikeness ('Odysseus loved himself / As the gods do, nor was it blasphemy', and 'Being in him boasted it was good', a line that recalls the language of Genesis 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31, in which God created a new feature of the universe each day, and 'saw that

⁹⁸ Mark Van Doren (1894-1972) was a significant literary figure during his lifetime, a professor at Columbia University and a poet of numerous epic receptions, including 'Achilles' (1948), 'To Homer' (1948), 'Hector Dead' (1953) and 'There Was an Island' (1953). Van Doren served as a mentor to a younger generation of poets (his students at Columbia) including Thomas Merton, Louis Simpson, Richard Howard, John Hollander and John Berryman, many of whom went on to write short poems of epic reception themselves. For reflections on his life and art, see his autobiography (Van Doren (1958)), and his recorded dialogues with his friend Archibald MacLeish (Bush (1964)).

it was good'). Through this balancing of qualities (female, heroic and divine), Van Doren's Odysseus becomes almost genderless, transcendent, an amalgam encompassing both 'greatness' and 'home ground', both masculine and feminine realms of influence, such that every mid-century reader might be able to relate to and find inspiration in him. This Odysseus is, above all, 'forgiven' (in the final line), for his philandering, wandering, outdated, male-focused Homeric past, and revised to flourish in a modern era of increasing equality between the sexes.

In the midst of the second-wave feminist movement, Richmond Lattimore published a four-part cycle of short poems on epic subjects,⁹⁹ entitled 'Notes from the *Odyssey*' (1968).¹⁰⁰ The final section, 'Odysseus', represents a clear revision of the hero for a feminist audience. All four stanzas are given here:

Happy is he who like Ulysses has returned,
and seen his housework done, the dead guests shoveled out
of the dining room into the street and burned,
the pretty maids all in a row strung on the line
like wash, and now, with the day clean, can look about
and say: I have come home. All this is mine.

The heavens and the hells I sailed between,
all the long days, are stored inside my skull.
They storm and stammer. Men's heads bob like crows
along the water, the girl-goddess throws
her sheet on a dead face. All is too full
of death. The bone-house too must be swept clean.

So, when I have planted my oar, I shall
not sail again. The gulfs are here, and all
enough to drink me down. I want no sea.
I have lived out the whole shape of mankind;
nothing of man but has been found in me,
and nothing left but live with my own mind.

Here is my wife (what is she like?), my son,
to comfort me for having all I prayed
to have. I wash the ghosts out of my head,
those moths, my moments; the girl-memories,
the tides, the teeth, the dreams are all undone.
Now I shall wash my hands and go to bed.

⁹⁹ Richmond Lattimore (1906-1984) was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, before being appointed as a professor of ancient Greek at Bryn Mawr College, where he spent the rest of his career. He is known especially for his works on Greek tragedy, and his well-regarded translations of Homer, *Iliad* (1951) and *Odyssey* (1965).

¹⁰⁰ Lattimore (1968). The other three sections are focalized through 'Elpenor', 'Circe' and 'Penelope'.

Instantly noticeable is the irony with which this Odysseus speaks of himself and his brutal homecoming. Unlike Van Doren's godlike force, who rejoices in his venerated and grounded place on the earth, Lattimore's hero pokes sardonic fun at his own unhappy situation. The poem begins with a sarcastic declaration: 'Happy is he who [...] / can look about / and say' – of a property full of corpses 'shoveled out' and 'burned' and 'strung on the line / like wash' – 'all this is mine' (stanza 1).¹⁰¹ The final stanza likewise suggests that only an ironic consolation is to be found in reunion with his family: Odysseus values the nearness of his wife and son 'to comfort me for having all I prayed / to have' (stanza 4). As these dark lines reveal, Lattimore's revised hero is fully cognisant of the conflicted moral problems that surround his violent return to Ithaca. In addition, this Odysseus is haunted by inescapable memories from his wandering past: 'The heavens and the hells I sailed between, / all the long days, are stored inside my skull. / They storm and stammer' (stanza 2). His journey was consuming ('all the long days') and diverse ('heavens' and 'hells'), and reaching home has not freed him from its tribulations, after all.

The hero does intend to sweep out the memories, just as he swept out the corpses from his halls: 'I wash the ghosts out of my head, / those moths, my moments; the girl-memories, / the tides, the teeth, the dreams are all undone' (stanza 4). However, an allusion in the poem's last line suggests that this purification may not be possible. The final stanza ends with another attempt at purging the past, and fostering hope for the future: 'Now I shall wash my hands and go to bed', in other words, rinse off the blood and memories, and conclude this phase of life, to begin afresh in the morning. However, this line echoes and invokes a famous literary context, in which the simulated act of washing hands, in fact, signifies the very impossibility of cleansing oneself of guilt: Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In Act 5 of that play, Lady Macbeth is observed sleepwalking, her mind subconsciously tortured with remorse for her role in a murder. A doctor and a lady-in-waiting watch as she repeatedly enacts the motions of hand-washing, before urging herself to bed:

¹⁰¹ The phrase 'happy is he' is a relatively common formulation in lyric descriptions of Odysseus, perhaps an allusion to Joachim Du Bellay's sonnet 'Heureux qui, comme Ulysse' (1555), picked up by modern American poets Lattimore, Van Doren (in his phrase 'what man so happy', above) and Carl Dennis (in 'Ithaka' (1979)).

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so
pale. – I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried;
he cannot come out on's grave.
[...]
To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate:
come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's
done cannot be undone. – To bed, to bed, to bed! (*Macbeth* Act 5, Scene 1)

Lady Macbeth, of course, never recovers from her emotional distress, and eventually dies of suicide. By repeating her guilty gesture and subtly quoting her words, this modern Odysseus implies his fear of retribution for his own vengeful actions, especially the potential for permanent mental ruin, such as befell Shakespeare's character. Far from being a straightforward, assured, invulnerable, traditionally masculine hero, whose slaughter of the disloyal maids and suitors is accepted without reservation (by himself, by his family and subjects and by many generations of readers of Homer), this revised hero is cynical, uncertain, pained and even feminine in his fearful realisation that his actions were insensitive and problematic, as modern audiences attest. Lattimore has rewritten Odysseus as a feminist, adopting as his own the critiques that progressive readers have raised about his actions.

Early in the twentieth century, female poets 'tr[ied] to invent a mode for female expression within the prevailing aesthetics of the century', seeking 'not to exclude male readers while including women'.¹⁰² Dodd termed this approach 'personal classicism', by which American women veiled their unseemly personal insights behind respectable classical allusions, to gain an audience for their insubordinate 'female' material. I propose that recent male defenders of Odysseus (like Van Doren and Lattimore) are similarly attempting to achieve a poetic and cultural goal (in this case, the preservation of the traditional epic hierarchy, in which the hero is central and admired), but within the new poetic style developed and popularised by modern female poets (and male poets also engaged in the project of empowering female characters).¹⁰³ By revising epic through an established feminist mode (short form, focalization through an ancient character, contemporary language and above all democratic sensibilities), these late twentieth-century male poets are riding a

¹⁰² Dodd (1992), 9.

¹⁰³ I am not necessarily proposing a chain of direct influence at work here, rather that (in Dodd's phrase) these poets have 'independently come to similar conclusions' about how to receive epic in new versions in a feminist climate (Dodd (1992), 7).

cultural wave, in a sense, fitting their work into an accepted mould. However, by using that inherited mode (invented to redress inequalities and highlight marginalised demographics) instead to repackage the fallen Odysseus to suit modern standards and tastes, and thus regain attention and approval, these male poets, in a way, cunningly reverse a century of progress: in an age that finally values female qualities and complexities, if Penelope is newly independent and in control (masculine), but Odysseus is suddenly insightful and sympathetic (feminine), then is he not once again the hero?

The poems described in this chapter divide and interact in categories along gender lines,¹⁰⁴ driven and shaped by modern social-political movements, especially second-wave feminism. Whereas traditional and early twentieth-century male poets limited and contained the ‘monsters’ and the ‘angel’ of the *Odyssey* (writing poems accentuating the harmful powers of Calypso, Circe and the Sirens, and the steadfast perfection of Penelope, to the exclusion of any subtlety, compassion or justice), feminist poets (women above all, but also men who adopted a democratic, revisionist approach, especially from the 1960s onward) responded by focalizing through the voices of these misunderstood archetypes in radical new versions, revealing the oversimplified women of the male tradition to be wronged, liberated, complicated and human. Answering the implicit criticism that such feminist readings and revisions levelled against the heroes of epic, reactionary poets (mostly men, but perhaps a few women, as well) arguably redeemed Odysseus (and to a lesser degree Achilles and Aeneas) by softening and feminising his character in a similar poetic mode, but with an opposing effect, of restoring interest in the main male characters.¹⁰⁵ Together, these patterns of gender and revision comprise the most extensive facet of the lyric reception of epic in modern

¹⁰⁴ Two pairs of poems from my corpus (representing clear call-and-response) encapsulate this dynamic: Wallace Stevens ‘The World as Meditation’ (1954), to which Eleanor Wilner replied with ‘The World is Not a Meditation’ (1984); and Edna St. Vincent Millay ‘An Ancient Gesture’ (1954) (which ends with the line ‘Penelope, who really cried’), which John McKernan answered with ‘Certainly Odysseus Wept’ (1999).

¹⁰⁵ Poems by women that soften and defend the perspectives of Homeric-Virgilian heroes include Louise Glück ‘The Triumph of Achilles’ (1985), and Rosanna Warren ‘The Twelfth Day’ (1993) (on Achilles) and ‘Turnus’ (2003) (on Aeneas).

American poetry, encompassing over 150 versions by more than 100 poets, both male and female, from throughout the past century.

6. Epic Anxiety: Rewriting Homer in One's Own Image

Tradition, Anxiety and Revision

A project devoted to poetic reception must eventually take into account the now-ubiquitous ideas of Harold Bloom, who memorably conceptualised poetic influence as a history of uneasy misreading and rewriting of prior works by later poets. In his defining book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom presented a theory that strong poets overcome their potentially paralysing sense of 'belatedness' in the literary tradition,¹ by reading their predecessors in an 'idiosyncratic' way that 'clear[s] imaginative space' for their own, new contributions.² As Bloom declared: 'To unname the precursor while earning one's own name is the quest of strong [...] poets'.³ What he termed 'the anxiety of influence' is the formative uneasiness that this goal of matching or surpassing forerunners fosters in major writers ('each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform'),⁴ a discomfort that results spontaneously in the creative, revisionist 'swerves' that ultimately differentiate the new genius from the old.⁵ All poetry, Bloom contends, should be understood in terms of this cycle (misreading that leads to anxiety, which is resolved by revision).

It is the purpose of this chapter to read two poems by major American poets with an awareness of Bloom's theoretical model: Robert Frost, 'The Generations of Men' (1914), and Robert Lowell, 'Ulysses and Circe' (1977). Both works allude explicitly to the *Odyssey*, and both rewrite Homer in ways that fundamentally shift the original text toward the

¹ He wrote, 'Cultural belatedness is never acceptable to a major writer' (Bloom (1997), xxv), and clarified also that 'my concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves' (Bloom (1973), 5).

² Bloom (1997), xxiii; Bloom (1973), 5.

³ Bloom (2011), 10.

⁴ Bloom (1973), 148.

⁵ Bloom took this term (*clinamen*, or 'swerve') from Lucretius, who used it to describe the unpredictable path of atoms, which (he supposed) veer off at the last moment to coalesce into objects, and would otherwise fall endlessly through space. It comes from the Latin verb *clinare*, meaning to bend or incline. Bloom (1973) emphasised the importance of this concept for poetry: 'The *clinamen* or swerve [...] is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism' (42). For a recent use of this term, see Greenblatt (2011).

preoccupations, hallmarks and unmistakable voices of the modern poets. The overt references to epic in both poems (and among prose statements by the poets) suggest that these contests with Homer are at least in part deliberate; but the full extent of the resulting revisions may exceed the poets' intentions, and expose the depth of their subconscious anxiety. In Frost's version, the *Odyssey* is miniaturised and contained within an American pastoral poem, the form of his most famous work; and in Lowell's version the epic is reduced to fit within a short, lyric sequence, and the nature of the original story is distorted from peaceful resolution to open-ended violence, to align with his favoured theme of rage.⁶

Both versions exemplify a remarkable dynamic that emerges from Bloom's theory of anxiety-induced, revisionary swerves from poet to poet, text to text: what he calls *apophrades*, or 'the return of the dead', whereby 'the very strongest' poets

achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*. [...] I mean [...] the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's great splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own.⁷

As an example of this uncanny phenomenon, Bloom cited a stanza from Wallace Stevens ('Le Monocle de Mon Oncle', VIII) in comparison with a later verse by John Ashbery ('Fragment', XIII), observing: 'An older view of influence would remark that the second of these stanzas "derives" from the first, but an awareness of the revisionary ratio of *apophrades*

⁶ There is a third major poem that fits this same model of reception: Wallace Stevens, 'The World as Meditation' (1952). A faultless article by DuBois & Lentricchia (2003b) presents an argument nearly identical to the one I had separately conceived for the works by Frost and Lowell: that Stevens was plagued throughout his life by anxiety about living up to the masculine standards of his father and acquaintances in his professional life, and about joining the ranks of what he calls the 'man-poets' (including Homer) in his creative life. Both insecurities predisposed him to struggle against the model of Homer, an *agon* that he first undertook in a decades-long (and unsuccessful) attempt to write an extended epic poem, wrestling Homer on Homer's terms; and eventually resolved for himself (to widespread praise) in a short lyric poem, 'The World as Meditation'. In this version, Stevens rewrote the *Odyssey* in his own image, as a lyric reflection on the nature of imagination and reality, the mode of his most famous and essential work, overthrowing Homer on Stevens' terms. The analysis by DuBois and Lentricchia uses some of the same terms I have used to describe this action, calling the poem 'a radical reduction of *The Odyssey* to domestic anecdote' (92), a 'lyricizing of Homer's narrative' (94) and a move by the self-conscious Stevens to 'ma[k]e over the canonical of canonical poets into an image of himself as writer' (94). For other readings of Stevens' poem as a reception of epic, see Boitani (1994), Pastan (1996), Cleghorn (2000) and Lensing (2001). On Stevens' two other receptions of the *Odyssey*, 'The Sail of Ulysses' and 'Presence of an External Master of Knowledge', see Vendler (1971), Beckett (1974), Filreis (1991) and Boitani (1994).

⁷ Bloom (1973), 141.

unveils Ashbery's relative triumph in his involuntary match with the dead. This particular strain, while it matters, is not central to Stevens, but it [has become] the greatness of Ashbery', such that 'when I read *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* now, in isolation from other poems by Stevens, I am compelled to hear Ashbery's voice'.⁸

Such apparent preemption of a past achievement by a later work is slightly different from T.S. Eliot's well-travelled dictum that the literary present acts upon the past. Eliot proposed that the meaning of all literature is interdependent:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. [...] What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. [...] It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other.⁹

This type of mutual, intertextual signification does seem similar to Bloom's model, except that it is inadvertent, inevitable and emergent from the natural, intellectual and historical dynamics among readers; whereas what Bloom proposed is quasi-conscious, accidentally-on-purpose, dependent on the personal identity of the individual poet in relation to his perception of a specific forerunner.

Bloom advised paradoxically that the 'swerve', the revisionary resolution of anxiety, 'always must be considered as though it were simultaneously intentional and involuntary'.¹⁰ In fact, he concentrated almost exclusively in his criticism on the involuntary aspect of the dynamic, on examples of subconscious poetic reception, in which poets inadvertently, unknowingly, reflexively and even unwillingly subverted their precursors (or attempted to) in a move to secure primacy.¹¹ He wrote of a strong American poet: 'Wallace Stevens, hostile to

⁸ Bloom (1973), 143-4.

⁹ Eliot (1919).

¹⁰ Bloom (1973), 44-5.

¹¹ That this defensive project is very often unsuccessful is another of Bloom's recurring observations. He wrote of the mastery of the canon: 'The largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare [e.g.] will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him' (xviii), and of the possibility of loss in the struggle to gain dominance: 'There is late Roethke that is the Stevens of

all suggestions that he owed anything to his reading of precursor poets, would have left us nothing of value but for Walt Whitman, whom Stevens sometimes scorned, almost never overtly imitated, yet uncannily resurrected'.¹² To illustrate his point, the critic quoted Stevens' protestations of being unreceptive to influence: "I know of no one who has been particularly important to me. My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others'", and also, from a letter to Richard Eberhart:

I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously. But there is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting what he reads for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people.¹³

On this Bloom remarked: 'This view, that poetic influence scarcely exists, except in furiously active pedants, is itself an illustration of one way in which poetic influence is a variety of melancholy or an anxiety-principle'.¹⁴ In other words (as he asserted strongly in *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011), a recent reflection on and clarification of his life's work), the anxiety of influence exists above all between *poems*, and not necessarily between poets.¹⁵ Even though Stevens stated no awareness of anxiety or influence, his poems enact restless revisionary impulses in relation to the poems of Whitman. In another example, 'Joyce arguably felt no personal anxiety regarding Shakespeare and Dante, but *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* manifest considerable belatedness. [...] All that matters for interpretation is the revisionary relationship between poems, as manifested in tropes, images, diction, syntax, grammar, metre, poetic stance'.¹⁶ Bloom even went so far as to decry the possibility of intentional allusion at all, stating: 'Perhaps there are only more or less creative or interesting mis-readings, for is not every reading necessarily a *clinamen*? [...] No poem has sources, and no poem merely alludes

Transport to Summer, and late Roethke that is the Whitman of *Lilacs*, but sorrowfully there is very little late Roethke that is late Roethke, for in Roethke the [swerve failed,] came as devastation, and took away his strength' (142).

¹² Bloom (1997), xxiii.

¹³ Bloom (1973), 7.

¹⁴ Bloom (1973), 7. On the sorrow of belatedness, Bloom (1973) wrote: 'Everything that makes up this book [...] intends to be part of a unified meditation upon the melancholy of the creative mind's desperate insistence upon priority' (13).

¹⁵ Bloom (2011), 6.

¹⁶ Bloom (2011), 6.

to another. Poems are written by men, and not by anonymous Splendors. The stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*'.¹⁷

Few readers are as thoroughly attuned to the echo chamber of world literature as Harold Bloom may be, or as self-assured in their ability to detect the subtle, complicated, implicit poetic affinities that may indicate dynamics of inadvertent reception and revision. Fortunately, I believe that overt references (which are much easier to spot) and even conscious statements (in letters, interviews, and prose) can also mark examples of anxiety between a modern poet and a past icon, which may well be acted out in the poetry. The conscious reference sometimes betrays a deeper pattern of subconscious revisionism, the extent of which might have gone beyond the poet's awareness, but the initial spark of which was known. Bloom felt that any consideration of intentionality was irrelevant in influence criticism, asserting in his revised preface: 'The anxiety may or may not be internalized by the later writer, depending upon temperament and circumstances, yet that hardly matters: the strong poem is the achieved anxiety'.¹⁸ However, he also suggested that

'Influence' is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships – imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological – all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and it is the central point of this book) is that the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call 'poetic misprision'. What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work.¹⁹

He distilled this idea further elsewhere: 'I define influence simply as literary love, tempered by defense'.²⁰ It strikes me that these two relational stances – love for a certain source, and multifaceted defensiveness against one's inflated impression (based on misprision) of its supremacy – can reasonably be sought and demonstrated among references and declarations, and perhaps even with greater likelihood than among the more amorphous qualities of style and tone that so often occupy Bloom. Pucci observed of Bloom's approach:

Even if [he] had not explicitly dissociated his work from allusion, it would still be patent that his project is much more broadly conceived. His close readings, though they entertain the ways in which poets influence each other, are rarely concerned with shared language. [...]

¹⁷ Bloom (1973), 43.

¹⁸ Bloom (1997), xxiii.

¹⁹ Bloom (1997), xxiii.

²⁰ Bloom (2011), 8.

There is no verbal evidence – borrowed language, the sine qua non of allusion – only vague intimations of shared ideas and temperaments, of similar symbols, themes, images that somehow make these two poems akin.²¹

Although ‘this mode of criticism is powerful and worthy’,²² it is not, I believe, the only point of entry for uncovering the anxiety of influence in modern poetry.

It is a premise of this chapter that the study of intertextual anxiety (the revisionary relationship that Bloom posits between *texts*) can be usefully predicated on an inquiry into interpersonal anxiety (the uneasy relationship between *poets*), which is discoverable in the written record (letters, journals, prose comments and poetic references), and can provide useful clues about where in the poetry it is worth plumbing for deeper, unconscious, revisionary shifts. By beginning from a study of intention²³ (the recorded observations of Frost and Lowell about Homer, and the unmistakable references that both poets make to the *Odyssey* in two of their most distinctive poems), it is possible to extrapolate a practice of anxious revisionism by these crucial American poets in relation to the epic text: they both (consciously or not) ‘swerve’ from their own self-startling, eccentric readings of Homer, to create new versions of the *Odyssey* in the style of their own most important work, each editing, miniaturising and ultimately subsuming the original epic into a single lyric poem in a characteristic mode. The resulting modern texts can certainly be read (as Bloom would have it) as interacting with the Homeric version in purely textual terms; but the phenomenon begins with the personalities of the two famed poets, and their shared anxiety about living up to the model of Homer.

²¹ Pucci (1998), 12.

²² Pucci (1998), 12.

²³ Most critics agree on the obvious impossibility of knowing an author’s intentions. Some, therefore, declare the inconsequence of intention as a critical question, e.g. famously Wimsatt & Beardsley (1946). Others allow a certain usefulness to the inquiry, despite the impossibility of certainty, e.g. Williams (1993) and those cited in his chapter. It is Vendler (1986), quoting Wallace Stevens, who captures my view of the matter: ‘It has been objected that a criticism suggesting that poems spring from life is reductive, that to say that “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” is about Stevens’ failed marriage is somehow injurious to the poem. It seems to me normal to begin with the life-occasion as we deduce it from the poem; it is only an error when one ends there’ (6), and in a footnote elaborating this statement, ‘To my mind, there is no lyric poet who does not have the aim of “self-expression”, from Sappho to Ashbery. Of course, only “fantastic and wonderful” self-expression can qualify as interesting literature. But to deny that poetry is the projection of fact (e.g. a failed romantic endeavor) onto the plane of language is to deny Stevens’ own sense of poetry: “The real is only the base. But it is the base”’ (quoting Stevens *Opus Posthumous* (1957), 80, n. 7).

Although the respective details of their backgrounds and creative phobias will be given in the separate sections that follow, it is worth noting that Robert Frost and Robert Lowell do share one aspect of historical context (in addition to their personal contexts of formal classical education, and attraction to and anxiety about Homer): their careers commenced under the auspices of the height of the Modernist movement, which had a particular, explicit focus on respect for predecessors, and the compulsion for originality. According to the twin figureheads T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, truly modern poets must be forever mindful of the hallowed literary tradition, but must also ‘make it new’ perpetually in their own work. In his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), Eliot declared

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance [than novelty]. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.²⁴

Thus Eliot established a steep standard for adequate historical consciousness, to which all hopeful modern poets must aspire thereafter, or knowingly fall short. His contemporary Ezra Pound famously initiated another imperative of Modernism, with his tenet ‘make it new’, that is, create radically original work, or nothing at all. Donald Davie explained this important instruction:

For [Pound, the erotic] was a matter of great moment, for he was one of those artists who hold that the energy of artistic creation is itself erotic, indeed (in his most extreme formulations) positively *genital*. As the child that comes or may come from a sexual encounter between a man and a woman differs from the child born from that man and some other woman (or from the same man and the same woman on another occasion), so every genuine poem is the unique product of one unrepeatable encounter between the artist and an unearthly partner who may be called ‘Muse’ or ‘goddess’. ‘Make it new!’ was notoriously Pound’s cry. Though every responsible artist must know the annals of his art (no one more than Pound insisted on that), still every artwork that is worth anything not only can be but has to be *new*, unprecedented.²⁵

Added to these pressures for deep historical awareness, and for continually renewing, incomparable inspiration, is Eliot’s other enduring formulation, from ‘What is a Classic?’ (1944), that a substantial work exhausts its niche in literary history:

That every great work of poetry tends to make impossible the production of equally great works of the same kind is indisputable. The reason may be stated partly in terms of conscious

²⁴ Eliot (1919), 39.

²⁵ Davie (1986), 139.

purpose: no first-rate poet would attempt to do again, what has already been done as well as it can be done in his language. It is only after the language – its cadence, still more than vocabulary and syntax – has, with time and social change, sufficiently altered, that another dramatic poet as great as Shakespeare, or another epic poet as great as Milton, can become possible. Not only every great poet, but every genuine, though lesser poet, fulfils once for all some possibility of the language, and so leaves one possibility less for his successors. The vein that he has exhausted may be a very small one; or may represent some major form of poetry, the epic or dramatic.²⁶

In other words, the later one emerges on the scene, the harder it is to find a role unfilled. This combination of publicly expressed and widely discussed principles might well have produced a mood of true anxiety among early-century emerging poets like Frost and Lowell, since an obliged awakening to the literary past serves mostly to make a poet painfully cognisant of the near-impossibility of making *anything* new in the wake of such masterful prior accomplishment; and these demands perhaps accounted in part for the enthralled anxiety that the would-be canonical poets Frost and Lowell felt about their uber-canonical precursor, Homer.

Robert Frost: Miniaturising the Odyssey

Critics of Robert Frost have often treated his classicism as ‘a relatively minor aspect of his writing, of mainly academic interest, if any’.²⁷ Quite to the contrary, I believe that the poet’s reception of ancient literature, and of Homer in particular, is of strong importance in understanding his work, as it expresses and reveals some of the central poetic goals and concerns of his career.²⁸ It also provides an essential example in modern American poetry, thus far overlooked in scholarship, of Bloom’s anxious revisionism.

That Frost was well positioned to engage with Homer is clear. From an early age, he was rigorously exposed to Classics in formal education, both at Lawrence High School in

²⁶ Eliot (1919), 125.

²⁷ Bacon (2001), 75.

²⁸ Pucci (1998) noted that certain insights about a modern poet are uniquely accessible through Bloom’s approach: ‘To read Bloom’s manifesto of antithetical criticism is to return to some of the best strains of Romantic criticism, for his notion of the anxious poet battling a strong precursor employs a methodology in which literary works are used to embellish the life – in this case the psychological life – of the literary artist’ (11).

Massachusetts (where he graduated first in his class on the ‘classical’ track, which encompassed the study of ‘Virgil, Homer, Horace, and the rest – all before I even went to college’),²⁹ and in his one semester at Dartmouth College (where he undertook courses on Latin prose, Homer and Plato)³⁰ and his two years at Harvard (where he studied, yet again, Homer, Theocritus, Terence, Livy, Catullus and Virgil’s *Eclogues*, and won a prize for academic excellence).³¹ Although the poet’s aversion to institutionalised education eventually prompted him to drop out before receiving a degree, Frost did credit Classics with holding his interest, despite his doubts about the system, stating in an interview later in his life: ‘When I came back to college [at Harvard] after running away [from Dartmouth], I thought I could stand it if I stuck to Greek and Latin. That’s all I did in those years’.³² As an adult, he often spoke of ancient literature as a source of poetic inspiration, constant throughout his life. Remembering his initial encounters with classical epic and lyric in high school, the poet remarked: ‘I don’t think the teacher understood how much poetry was in those pages’.³³ He amassed a substantial private collection of Greek and Roman texts, commentaries, translations and histories (including five separate versions of the *Odyssey*),³⁴ which are now housed and catalogued in the New York University archives.³⁵ His reading of classical authors is something that others acknowledged, too. Robert Lowell, for example, in his tribute to the poet in 1963 in *The New York Review of Books*, noted that Frost kept the poems of

²⁹ Parini (2001), 24, quoting Frost. Some biographers elaborate on this statement, suggesting that Frost’s high school curriculum included selections from Caesar, Cicero, Ovid, Plautus and Tacitus, as well as the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* (Newdick (1940), 404, and Parini (2001), 26).

³⁰ Thompson (1966), 138; Mertins (1965), 49; and Parini (2001), 34.

³¹ Newdick (1940), 405; Thompson (1966), 236; Putnam (1983), 245; and Parini (2001), 61, 64.

³² Poirier (1995), 877.

³³ Parini (2001), 24. Cf. quotations in the first section of Chapter 1 of this thesis.

³⁴ Frost owned copies of translations by G.H. Palmer (1897), H. Bates (1929), T.E. Shaw (1932), E. Rees (1960) and R. Fitzgerald (1961). In addition, Frost’s library included two translations of the *Iliad*, W.C. Bryant (1870) and A. Platt (1894); the complete works of Virgil in Latin, J. Conington (ed.) (1895); and two critical works related to ancient epic, T. Frank (1922) *Vergil: A Biography*, and M.I. Finley (1954) *The World of Odysseus*, as well as numerous other classical volumes (works by Catullus, Horace, Theocritus, Ovid and Lucretius, among others). He does not appear to have owned a copy of Homer in Greek, despite his academic distinction in the subject, and might thus have worked from translations in composing his poetic references to the *Odyssey*.

³⁵ In total, the Frost library comprises around 2,000 volumes, about 67 of which (by my estimation) are related to Classics. See the catalogue, J.E. Frost (1979) *Robert Frost Library Checklist*, held in the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University. (Accessed Summer 2002, as research for my undergraduate thesis at Bowdoin College, ‘“The same old metaphor always”: rural landscape in the poetry of Virgil and Robert Frost’ (2007): <http://cbbcat.net/record=b3138007~S19>.)

Catullus on his bedside table.³⁶ He often quoted Greek and Latin authors and works in his formal prose,³⁷ and included humorous puns on classical quotations in his personal letters.³⁸ He shared his interest in Classics with his family, once proudly declaring in an interview that his children read George Herbert Palmer's 'melodic prose translation' of the *Odyssey*, rather than attend the movies.³⁹

Frost's appreciation for the *Odyssey*, in particular, shows hallmarks of the profound 'literary love' that Bloom suggested is one of the defining conditions for poetic influence (the other being a reaction of 'defense'). In the *Chicago Tribune* in 1958, Frost listed the *Odyssey* as one of five 'books that have meant the most to me in my lifetime',⁴⁰ and he seems to have viewed it in relation to one of his most fundamental beliefs about poetry, that it is metaphor, at its core. In his essay 'The Constant Symbol', Frost wrote:

There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. [...] Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always.⁴¹

The most substantive and striking of Frost's prose references to the *Odyssey* occurred in his similar lecture 'Education by Poetry', in which he contended again that metaphor is 'the height of all thinking' and a necessary concept for students to be 'at home in' (to use Frost's idiosyncratic phrase), that 'education by poetry is education by metaphor,' and therefore that learning to understand poetry is imperative for understanding the world in general.⁴²

Interestingly, the only two examples of literary metaphor that Frost gave in this lengthy address were both from the *Odyssey*. He invoked first an image from Book 5, of the

³⁶ Giroux (1987), 11.

³⁷ E.g. Poirier (1995), 724, 238, 783, 792, 849, 852 and 899.

³⁸ See Finnegan (1979), 109-10, for a catalogue of Frost's classical jests in correspondence.

³⁹ Newdick (1940), 408.

⁴⁰ Poirier (1995), 852. The others on this list were *The Poems of Catullus*, Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, John L. Stevens' *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, and The Old Testament. Three out of the five works are related to Classics.

⁴¹ Poirier (1995), 786. Frost explored the possibilities of metaphor centrally in his own work, and famously 'admonished [his readers] against mistaking the agricultural New England scene for his whole subject matter [...] saying "I talk about universals in terms of New England. [...] I talk about the whole world in terms of New England"' (Cook (1974), 23, also quoted in Bacon (2001), 75). Classical details serve Frost as one method for creating poetic points of contact between remote planes of reality, 'saying one thing in terms of another'.

⁴² Poirier (1995), 719-21.

Phaeacian coast appearing as ‘an inverted shield’, when Odysseus catches sight of land at last after his epic swim:

The shield [mentioned recently by my student in conversation] reminds me – just to linger a minute – the shield reminds me of the inverted shield spoken of in one of the books of the *Odyssey*, the book that tells about the longest swim on record. I forget how long it lasted – several days, was it? – but at last as Odysseus came near the coast of Phaeacia, he saw it on the horizon ‘like an inverted shield’.⁴³

Frost continued:

There is a better metaphor in the same book. In the end Odysseus comes ashore and crawls up the beach to spend the night under a double olive tree, and it says, as in a lonely farmhouse where it is hard to get fire – I am not quoting exactly – where it is hard to start the fire again if it goes out, they cover the seeds of fire with ashes to preserve it for the night, so Odysseus covered himself with the leaves around him and went to sleep. There you have something that gives you character, something of Odysseus himself. ‘Seeds of fire.’ So Odysseus covered the seeds of fire in himself. You get the greatness of his nature.⁴⁴

These references reveal in context, I think, the poet’s sense of the *Odyssey* as a source of poetry in its most essential and fundamental state, distilled into metaphors that represent (as he saw it) the metaphoric matches by which people describe and comprehend the entire world around them. Frost made quite a profound connection here, between Homer and the very essence of poetry, which could well have predisposed him to grapple subconsciously with influence-anxiety in his relation to the *Odyssey*, and poetry itself, represented thereby.

Another biographical circumstance that flags Frost and Homer as a potentially anxious relationship was the modern poet’s intense ambition. According to Donald Hall, a younger poet and student of Frost, he was ‘a man possessed by [... a] desire for fame which no amount of celebrity could satisfy’.⁴⁵ From one angle, this impulse might have correlated simply with a need to make a living, which Frost had never been able to do satisfactorily in his half-hearted years as a farmer in the harsh New England climate. In their chapter on Frost for *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, DuBois and Lentricchia describe a letter

⁴³ Poirier (1995), 724. The lines in question are technically epic similes, including *Od.* 5.280-1: γαίης Φαιήκων, ὅθι τ’ ἄγχιστον πέλεν αὐτῶ· εἶσατο δ’ ὡς ὅτε ῥινὸν ἐν ἠεροειδέϊ πόντῳ (‘the land of the Phaiacians, where it was nearest to his view: it looked to him like a shield set in the hazy sea’); and *Od.* 5.388-9: ἐνθα δύο νύκτας δύο τ’ ἡμέρα κύματι πηγῶ/ πλάζετο, πολλὰ δέ οἱ κραδίη προτιόσσετ’ ὄλεθρον (‘then for two nights and two days he was driven on by the heavy swell, and many times in his heart foresaw death’).

⁴⁴ Poirier (1995), 724. The scene that Frost recalled here is *Od.* 5.475-493. For a poem in my catalogue drawing on this passage, see Peter Davison ‘Castaway’ (1970). The British poet Michael Longley also published a reception of these lines, ‘A Bed of Leaves’ (1995), on which see Hardwick (2011).

⁴⁵ Hall (1992), 14. Frost even referred to Hall as his ‘son’ at times, so they were not superficially acquainted (Hall (1992), 36, 39).

from the poet, written just before his career took off, sharing his straightforward, unguarded wish to be successful:

Just a few months after his first book appeared, Frost, writing from England, told [his friend John] Bartlett that he would never be satisfied with the snobby pleasures of avant-garde renown, 'success,' as he put it, 'with the critical few who are supposed to know,' because 'really to arrive where I can stand on my legs as a poet and nothing else I must get outside that circle to the general reader who buys books in their thousands'.⁴⁶

In order to attain this following (which Frost alone among his generation managed to do, in the end), he undertook to write accessible verse, in common speech on everyday themes, so as to attract and not alienate a wide democratic audience.⁴⁷ DuBois and Lentricchia, again, reflect upon this approach:

In another interview, [Frost] said that a 'poet should not include in his writing anything that the average reader will not easily understand'. The shocking word is 'easily'. No doubt that's why Frost chose it – as a signal of his democratic nativism, the mark of a poet who [...] would so define and proudly advertise himself as ordinary to those who might buy books in the thousands, if only they could be confident that those books would speak to them, coming from one of their own.⁴⁸

In short, he cultivated an impression of simplicity to gain his desired readership.⁴⁹

In another light, Frost's aspiration was far more lofty, grasping and raw than simple livelihood and book sales. In his very revealing essay (containing vivid anecdotes of Frost's competitive rage against other prominent poets, preening in front of audiences and split between private self and public persona),⁵⁰ Hall suggests that he craved not merely success, but true 'fame', 'the love that everyone wants, impersonal love, love from strangers for what we are, what we do or make'.⁵¹ Frost's 'vain and vulnerable' response to applause, criticism and praise 'came from his deep and vast ambition to become a great poet, to be immortal, to

⁴⁶ DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a), 46.

⁴⁷ DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a) summarise this plan succinctly as posing a stark contrast to other ambitious poets of the period: '[Frost's] sharpest effects were easily as subtle as they were unsettling, but his verbal surfaces were accessible, even kindly. Maybe he could bore subversively from within while doing what countless avant-garde writers could not do: make a living from his writing' (45).

⁴⁸ DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a), 47.

⁴⁹ That he succeeded in that regard was clear, even during his lifetime: 'In his last years Frost's poetry sold in numbers that not even the combined sales of his powerful modernist company [Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Stevens] could match' (DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a), 46).

⁵⁰ The most affecting of these is Hall's memory of accompanying Frost to a sold-out reading for 4,000 people at the University of Michigan, after which, as the white-haired poet pushed through the dense crowd to the limousine, he turned, 'raised his arms about his shoulders [...] and said in a loud and tremulous voice, "Remember me". "We will", said the many voices around us and in back of us, "We will"' (37). See, also, an anecdote of Frost's sore outrage when he heard of an up-and-coming poet imitating Eliot (whom literary professionals preferred), rather than Frost (21).

⁵¹ Hall (1992), 38.

write poems that would *stick*' (Frost's own word for this goal of enduring).⁵² These patent qualities – jealousy, insecurity, insatiable drive – seem likely preconditions for an anxious relationship with a looming, canonical presence like Homer.

Having established these potential signals of anxiety, it remains to read Frost's poem in comparison with the *Odyssey*, an exercise that reveals a distinct revisionary relationship between the texts. In his famous, career-launching volume *North of Boston* (1914), Robert Frost published a lyric dialogue entitled 'The Generations of Men', which Auden called 'one of his best long poems',⁵³ and which seems at first glance to be yet another of his signature New England narratives, enacting the dramas of rural life in an authentic American vernacular. The poem depicts, on this level, a straightforward, modern-day encounter between two cousins, a young man and woman previously unacquainted but meeting in a rainstorm, at a small-town family reunion from which all other relatives have been frightened off by bad weather. It adheres to several poetic tenets that emerge, over the course of his career, as central to Frost's identity and accomplishment as a poet.

First of all, 'The Generations of Men' is in the pastoral form, which Frost openly borrowed from Virgil, and famously modified over many poems for his modern purposes. This appropriation of the ancient eclogue for use in a twentieth-century New England context is acknowledged by every critic of Frost's classicism.⁵⁴ Fogelman defined the pastoral verse-form in this way:

The eclogue [...] is a brief, highly conventional monologue or dialogue, usually in a rustic setting, in which some contrast is debated or implied between simple (natural, innocent, rustic, or primitive) and complex (urban, urbane, or civilized) attitudes toward human existence and interaction. As we have it from Theocritus, the idyll is typically a light vignette, a brief ordinary incident in the lives of imaginary central figures, usually shepherds or goatherds. Though dramatic conflict of some kind is essential to the form, it exhibits little action, less development, and only traces of a plot.⁵⁵

⁵² Hall (1992), 24, 38.

⁵³ Auden (1963), 348.

⁵⁴ E.g. Brower (1963), 157-9; Perrine (1974), 230-5; Bacon (1975), 8-9; Finnegan (1979), 109, 111; Ziolkowski (1993), 158-63; and Alpers (1996), 309-22.

⁵⁵ Fogelman (1986), 109-110.

Frost employed the eclogue conventionally, to comment on political, urban realities through rural setting and seemingly simplistic poetic technique;⁵⁶ but also innovatively, to capture human speech-sounds in poetry, thereby extending the genre to include a capacity for realistic emotion and raw drama.⁵⁷ The poet himself acknowledged Virgil's *Eclogues* as his inspiration for this practice, explaining that the renowned collection *North of Boston* was 'written as scattered poems in a form suggested by the *Eclogues* of Virgil'.⁵⁸ He recalled, furthermore: 'I first heard the voice from the printed page in a Virgilian eclogue and from Hamlet'.⁵⁹ This observation is often truncated in quotation before the mention of Shakespeare, but Bacon pointed out that the phrase about Hamlet is actually crucial in clarifying Frost's interest in Virgil:

If what [Frost] was noting in the *Eclogues* was also in Hamlet, it was not the spirit of the pastoral. He is referring not to the special relation of man and nature that characterizes ancient pastoral, but [...] to 'images of the ear,' what he elsewhere called 'the sound of sense'. It is for this, and for the mime form, the poetic dialogue or monologue, that he drew on the *Eclogues* and Theocritus' *Idylls*.⁶⁰

This idea about the 'sound of sense' was one of Frost's key 'principle[s] of versification'.⁶¹

The poet famously believed that 'all poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech'.⁶²

His biographer Jay Parini notes that Frost spent his dairy-farming years in rural New Hampshire listening carefully to the sounds and patterns of the dialect spoken by his neighbours.⁶³ Frost himself joked that his initial interest in other people was merely in their voices: 'It would seem absurd to say it (and you mustn't quote me as saying it) but I suppose the fact is that my conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical

⁵⁶ E.g. 'Build Soil: A Political Pastoral', in which Frost critiqued mid-twentieth-century American politics through a verse-dialogue in the model of Virgil's first eclogue. Lynen (1960) wrote of the poem: 'In Frost as in Virgil, Tityrus and Meliboeus are an aged poet and a distressed young farmer, and they discuss the farm problem of the great depression much as their ancient counterparts [discussed] the economic plight of farmers in Latium. Frost transforms the Virgilian nostalgia for country life into a manifesto for regionalist self-reliance' (127). Cf. Ziolkowski (1993), 160, and Harrison (2008).

⁵⁷ E.g. Frost's poems 'Home Burial' and 'Death of the Hired Man', famous for depicting spare, human pathos.

⁵⁸ Finnegan (1979), 111.

⁵⁹ Bacon (1975), 8.

⁶⁰ Bacon (1975), 8.

⁶¹ Cf. Frost's explanations of the concept in Poirier (1995), 664-6, 673-9, 884-6 and 687-9.

⁶² Poirier (1995), 701.

⁶³ Parini (2001), 88, 133-5.

interest in their speech—in what I used to call their sentence sounds—the sound of sense’.⁶⁴ Frost conceptualised his desire to capture this realism in poetry as a ‘battle with inherited poetic diction’, especially what he perceived as American lyric servitude to English Romanticism.⁶⁵ According to DuBois and Lentricchia: ‘Frost believed that in *North of Boston* he had scored a decisive victory in literary history, because there he had “dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above”; he had performed “in a language absolutely unliterary” and had barred from his writing all “words and expressions he had merely *seen*” (in books) and had not “*heard* used in running speech”’.⁶⁶

‘The Generations of Men’ showcases this preoccupation with realistic human speech-patterns. Apart from about 40 lines of framing narrative (in a poem of 212 lines), the real substance of the piece is quoted dialogue between rural American characters, much of it likably eccentric and un-literary (for example the girl’s observation about the party having been rained out (‘it looks that way’ (line 35)); her response to the boy’s description of their complicated genealogy (‘I own what you say makes my head spin’ (line 60)); or the boy’s joking reply, when his companion tries to remember how many generations ago her ‘great, great, great, great, great Granny’ lived (‘See that you get her greatness right. Don’t stint her’ (line 117)). In such lines, this poem divulges and gratifies Frost’s fascination with the human voice.

‘The Generations of Men’ also illustrates the poet’s typical choice to obscure his reception of classical texts and themes. Perhaps due to his desire to woo a broad audience, Frost often hid the depths of his erudition and meaning in his poetry. His work does contain a complex thread of allusive reference, much of which is classical, and the poet believed that allusion to varied sources was an important quality of good verse, writing of this theory: ‘In a little poem it ought to be – even in a short one you know – that you can put your finger on five or six items that come from different quarters of the Universe’.⁶⁷ He did occasionally acknowledge his own sources in interviews or prose, for instance his statement about the

⁶⁴ Poirier (1995), 684.

⁶⁵ DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a), 34, 38.

⁶⁶ DuBois & Lentricchia (2003a), 34.

⁶⁷ Bacon (1977), 16, quoting Frost.

Eclogues, quoted above. More often, though, Frost staunchly refused to supply glosses or footnotes to illuminate his meaning (one example, perhaps, of his marked mischievousness), instead insisting that reading is an ‘activity’, an exhilarating search by readers for the poet’s multifarious meanings and purposes, which must not be forestalled by an overly transparent or forthcoming poet.⁶⁸ In addition, Frost very often veiled his poetic allusions, concealing a mythical structure beneath a surface of contemporary detail (as in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, which can be read as a muted version of a heroic quest, ending with an exact echo, as in Homer),⁶⁹ or dropping in one fleeting or opaque signpost only, to hint at the true depth of meaning. This is the case in ‘The Generations of Men’, in which two brief references to the Homeric maiden ‘Nausicaa’, through the voice of Frost’s male speaker, who playfully calls his female cousin by this ancient name (lines 153 and 160), are the only solid clue to the poem’s Odyssean roots.⁷⁰

Tracing this explicit invocation back to the *Odyssey* and invoking that text as an interpretive lens, reveals a final and significant (especially in the light of Bloom’s theory) fact about the poem: ‘The Generations of Men’ encompasses the entire arc of Homer’s epic within its lines. By reading the texts in comparison, Frost’s poem becomes an epic ‘journey’ of sorts, in which the young characters venture out in a storm, meet by chance, traverse their past and future through memory and prophecy (in the voices of their remembered dead grandparents), and achieve at last a homecoming to the forgotten, deserted homestead of their ancestors. Although the poet often softens, inverts and mutes his Homeric imagery, to suit the gentleness of his pastoral setting, the heart of the plot is unmistakable: it begins with a departure,

⁶⁸ Bacon (1977), 16, quoting Frost. The poet’s aversion to writing footnotes or pointing out allusions was unyielding. In Frost’s view, such revelation was ‘as dispiriting as the explanation of a joke’, for ‘the heart sinks when robbed of the chance to see for itself what a poem is all about’ (Poirier (1995), 815).

⁶⁹ Hamilton (2000) writes evocatively of the repeated final two lines: ‘Echo is more demanding than rhyme and is, paradoxically, both quintessentially poetic and antipoetic. Exact repetition often seems a blunder, a want of grace, the way Homer nods, even though it is also one of the more profound markers of the Homeric poems. We go back and back to ‘wine-dark sea’ and ‘clean-limbed Hera’, and the more we repeat those words the more their suggestions expand. For just as exact repetition can seem a defect, it can deepen the mystery so that poetry might be defined as, precisely, that which bears repetition’ (123). Cf. Rosenberry (1963) on the classical depths of ‘Stopping by Woods’. Frost himself claimed that the deceptively simple poem ‘contained all he ever knew’ (Cook (1948), 355, 357).

⁷⁰ The likely allusion in the title to *Il.* 6.146 (οἷη περ φύλλων γενεῆ τοιῆ δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν) is perhaps another subtle, first sign that it might be fruitful to activate memories of Homer, in reading this new text.

includes romantic adventures along the way, and ends with a homecoming. In essence, the poem miniaturises the archetypal epic story, subsuming Homer wholly within a quintessential work by Robert Frost.

This new version opens with a setting out, with characters travelling to a small town for a family reunion, in order to

try to fathom

The past and get some strangeness out of it. (lines 17-18)

Theirs is an abstract, curious quest for self-understanding. Unfortunately a bout of rain disrupts the proposed gathering:

But rain spoiled it all. The day began uncertain,
With clouds low-trailing and moments of rain that misted. (lines 19-20)

However, in contrast to the violent, merciless storm that propels Odysseus on his haphazard course to Phaeacia (*Od.* 5.313-32), the rainstorm in Frost's poem is gentle. Early in their conversation, his two characters discuss the weather:

'I think it's going to rain.'
'It's raining.'
'No, it's misting; let's be fair.
Does the rain seem to you to cool the eyes?' (lines 67-70)

This quiet summer storm, with rain so faint as to have arguably not yet begun, is inverted from Homer's raging weather, but has the same effect on the heroes: it drives them forward. Due to the rain, all the other relatives stay inside on the day appointed for the party, but Frost's male character,

from a farm not far away
Strolled thither, not expecting he would find
Anyone else, but out of idleness. (lines 25-7)

The female character, too, explains: 'I only idled down' (line 37). So whim, and a gentle rain – muted, pastoral versions of Homer's epic war, and an ocean storm – are the subtle forces propelling these figures on their journey.

For the remainder of the poem, Frost's modern characters engage in a conversation full of word play, recalling the clever, teasing exchanges between Odysseus and Nausicaa in *Odyssey* 6. Frost's female speaker, like Odysseus in his encounter with the Phaeacian maidens, does not reveal her name to her new companion, prompting him to give her the

nickname ‘Nausicaa’. While assigning her this title, the young man in Frost’s poem cleverly ventriloquises, complimenting the girl indirectly by speaking through outside, imagined voices. He pretends to decipher the ‘voices speaking out of’ the brook ‘in the empty valley’ nearby:

‘The voices seem to say—’

‘I’m waiting’ [declares his female companion]

‘Don’t! The voices seem to say:
Call her Nausicaa, the unafraid
Of an acquaintance made adventurously’.⁷¹

‘I’ll let you say that—on consideration.’

‘I don’t see very well how you can help it.
You want the truth. I speak but by the voices.
You see they know I haven’t had your name.’ (lines 150-8)

This cunning move – of flattering his newly encountered cousin by comparing her to a lovely, classical girl in the words of ‘voices’ not his own – enables the young man to hint at his attraction coyly, and perhaps spark her interest without having to state his own indelicately. The tactic evokes Nausicaa’s address to Odysseus at the end of *Odyssey* 6, in which she praises the stranger warmly, but through the pretended voice of Phaeacian townspeople:

τῶν ἀλειίνω φῆμιν ἀδευκέα, μή τις ὀπίσω
μωμεύη· μάλα δ’ εἰσὶν ὑπερφίαλοι κατὰ δῆμον·
καὶ νῦν τις ᾧδ’ εἶπησι κακώτερος ἀντιβολήσας·
‘τίς δ’ ὄδε Νausικάα ἔπεται καλός τε μέγας τε
ξείνος; ποῦ δέ μιν εὔρε; πόσις νῦν οἱ ἔσσεται αὐτῆ.
ἢ τίνα που πλαγχθέντα κομίσσατο ἧς ἀπὸ νηὸς
ἀνδρῶν τηλεδαπῶν, ἐπεὶ οὐ τινες ἐγγύθεν εἰσὶν·
ἢ τίς οἱ εὐξαμένη πολυάρητος θεὸς ἦλθεν
οὐρανόθεν καταβάς, ἕξει δέ μιν ἦματα πάντα. (*Od.* 6.273-81)

‘These are the people whose malicious gossip I want to avoid, to have no one blaming me later. There are some very critical types in this town, and if one of the cruder ones were to meet us he could say something like this: “Now who is this tall and handsome stranger Nausikaā has with her? Where did she find him? He will be her husband, I warrant you. She will have picked him up, no doubt, from his own ship – some foreigner from far away who has wandered here, since there are no other people close to us. Or perhaps some god has come down from heaven and in answer to her constant prayers, and will keep her all her days”.’

By donning the pose of a critical local man, Nausicaa can offer Odysseus a compliment on his looks (‘handsome stranger’; ‘perhaps some god [...] from heaven’) and a veiled hope of

⁷¹ In Homer’s scene, Nausicaa’s handmaids flee from the stranger, while the princess alone, empowered by the goddess Athena, bravely remains to greet him (*Od.* 6.135-141).

marriage ('he will be her husband'; 'will keep her all her days'), while still maintaining a chaste distance. These romantic explorations occupy the central action of Frost's poem.

At the end, Frost's heroes achieve a metaphorical homecoming – not yet a reality but foretold by their imagined ancestors – in a place marked by a timber beam:

'Be good. The voices say:
"Call her Nausicaa, and take a timber
That you shall find lies in the cellar, charred
Among the raspberries, and hew and shape it
For a doorsill or other corner piece
In a new cottage on the ancient spot.'" (lines 159-64)

This 'ancient spot' is the cellar hole in which the two characters have been sitting as they talk, the legendary site of their family's first settlement. The oracle in these lines predicts the couples' resurrection of a new life from the ruins of this dilapidated place. The construction of a home around a timber corner piece recalls, of course, the detail by which Odysseus proves his own homecoming to his wife, their massive handmade bed, built around the pillar of a rooted olive tree:

θάμνος ἔφυ τανύφυλλος ἐλαίης ἔρκεος ἐντός,
ἀκμηνὸς θαλέθων· πάχετος δ' ἦν ἡὔτε κίων.
τῷ δ' ἐγὼ ἀμφιβαλὼν θάλαμον δέμον, ὄφρ' ἐτέλεσσα,
πυκνήσιν λιθάδεσσι, καὶ εὖ καθύπερθεν ἔρεψα,
κολλητὰς δ' ἐπέθηκα θύρας, πυκινῶς ἀραρυίας.
καὶ τότε ἔπειτ' ἀπέκοψα κόμην τανυφύλλου ἐλαίης,
κορμὸν δ' ἐκ ρίζης προταμῶν ἀμφέξεσα χαλκῷ
εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως καὶ ἐπὶ στάθμην ἴθυνα,
ἐρμῖν' ἀσκήσας, τέτρηνα δὲ πάντα τερέτρῳ.
ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἀρχόμενος λέχος ἔξεον, ὄφρ' ἐτέλεσσα,
δαιδάλλων χρυσῷ τε καὶ ἀργύρῳ ἠδ' ἐλέφαντι·
ἐν δ' ἐτάνουσ' ἱμάντα βοῶς φοίνικι φαεινόν. (*Od.* 23.190-201)

'There was a bushy long-leaved olive-tree growing inside the yard, healthy and in full growth: it was thick as a pillar. Round this tree I started building a bedroom with close-packed stones, and finished it with a fine roof above and a pair of planed doors fitting closely together. And then I cut off the spreading top of the long-leaved olive-tree, and from the root up trimmed the trunk all round with the bronze, smoothing it well and skillfully and making it true to the line, to fashion a bed-post out of it: and then I bored it through with an augur. Beginning from this I went on working the bedstead until I had finished it, decorating it with gold and silver and ivory: and then I strung it with straps of ox-hide dyed brilliant with purple.'

There is a clear verbal parallel between these passages: Frost's phrase 'hew and shape' is essentially a translation of Homer's verbs ἀπέκοψα and ἀμφέξεσα (*Od.* 23.195-6). Robert Fitzgerald, in fact, echoes Frost's version exactly in his rendering of these lines:

Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost [.]

Frost's 'new cottage on the ancient spot' is an allusive signpost, a hint that this is a new poem on an ancient model, and that the return of these characters to their ancestral and future home, built around the charred, timber corner-piece of an old story, resurrected for a new context, is the culmination of an Odyssean journey.

The 'journey' in 'The Generations of Men' is abstract, personal and good-humoured, the 'homecoming' metaphorical, prophetic and rustic. These choices of tone and emphasis in Frost's version (often revising and shifting Homer to maintain the mild atmosphere),⁷² accentuate the romantic, realistic, simple, conversational and pastoral qualities of his source, calling to mind the ways in which the original text foretells the traits of Frost's future, most characteristic work. In a sense, this stylistic rewriting accomplishes the strong *apophrades* identified by Bloom, by which a belated poet inserts himself unforgettably into the work of his forerunner. The timbre of certain romantic passages from the *Odyssey* will forever strike me as Frostian, from now on. In addition, by shrinking the entire epic plot line to fit into a brief, rural, dialogical, narrative poem, 'The Generations of Men' swallows up and diminishes Homer's prior text, subsuming it within Frost's famous pastoral mode. Whether or not the poet intended this effect, the intertextual interaction between the 'The Generations of Men' and the *Odyssey* clearly reveals this aggressive stance of attempted containment.

Robert Lowell: Encircling Homer

Like Frost, Robert Lowell was predisposed to measure himself against Homer. His exposure to ancient literature likewise began in his earliest schooling, as a young child at the

⁷² 'The Generations of Men' is, admittedly, more hopeful, pleasant and mild than many of Frost's other rural narratives in the same form. The darkness of Frost is now widely known, but was once an overlooked quality of his work. At Frost's eighty-fifth birthday dinner, the appointed speaker Lionel Trilling declared that Frost's poetry represents 'the terrible actualities of life', and concluded dramatically: 'I regard Robert Frost as a terrifying poet' (Parini (2001), 408-9). Responding to this observation in an interview, Frost remarked: 'I might run my eye over my book after Trilling, and wonder why he hadn't seen it sooner: that there's plenty to be dark about, you know. It's full of darkness' (Poirier (1995), 887). Frost also recorded in his private notebooks, at least twelve times, the curious phrase: 'dark, darker, darkest' (Faggen (2006)).

Brimmer School in Boston, and then as a boarding student at the elite St. Mark's School in rural Massachusetts. At both institutions, he was drilled in the study of Greek, Latin and classical rhetoric.⁷³ Lowell responded with particular enjoyment to epic poetry, as he revealed at the time in a passionate essay on the *Iliad*, published in the school magazine,⁷⁴ and recalled years later in a letter to Ezra Pound:

At [St. Mark's] I began reading Homer through the dish-water of Bryant's 19th century translation. I mulled over the ideas for some time, and somehow they gradually became very real. The tremendous growth of Achilles and above all Zeus[,] the universal symbol which has become almost a religion with me. I had always chafed against what I thought was Christianity, the immortality of the soul, the idealistic unreal morality and the insipid blackness of the Episcopalian church. Homer's world contained a God higher than anything I had ever known, and yet his world blinked at no realities [..., even] the whoring of Zeus and the savagery of the heroes.⁷⁵

As was expected by his patrician Bostonian family, Lowell started at Harvard in the fall of 1935, where he spent one year in the 'desultory study of English [literature]'.⁷⁶ However, spurred by a quarrel with his father and the advice of his mentor Allen Tate, Lowell dropped out in the spring of 1937 and transferred to Kenyon College in Ohio, at the same time switching his major from English to Classics, excelling at both languages and graduating after three years *summa cum laude*.⁷⁷ Lowell credited his Kenyon colleagues and teachers with encouraging him to return to classical studies, with their warning that 'you'll just cut yourself off from humanity if you don't';⁷⁸ but equally cited his own love of the subject as an enduring motivation. Lowell explained in an interview: 'The literature [is] amazing, particularly the Greek; there's nothing like Greek in English at all',⁷⁹ and he deemed Virgil 'a much better writer than Shakespeare'.⁸⁰ The poet continued to read ancient poetry throughout his adult life, in translation and in the original, for pleasure and for poetic inspiration. From comments in his correspondence, critics gather that, after college, he privately studied Sophocles,

⁷³ Mariani (1994), 48, and Talbot (2006), 269-70.

⁷⁴ Giroux (1987), 145-51.

⁷⁵ Hamilton (2005), 4.

⁷⁶ Talbot (2006), 270.

⁷⁷ Mariani (1994), 69.

⁷⁸ Seidel (1961), 24.

⁷⁹ Seidel (1961), 24.

⁸⁰ Mariani (1994), 70.

Thucydides, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal and Virgil (*The Georgics* and the last six books of the *Aeneid*), all in the ancient languages.⁸¹

In the fall of 1956, Lowell taught Homer in Greek to undergraduates at the University of Iowa, aided by classicist Gerald Else.⁸² It is also likely that around the same period the poet was engaged in teaching the undergraduate literature survey courses, in which Homer and Virgil were presented in translation, as part of a narrative of the grand arc of human progress from Homer to modern times. Throughout his mid-century teaching career, Lowell had posts at the University of Iowa, the University of Cincinnati, Boston University and Harvard, where he spent ten years in the 1960s and 1970s. At the very least, the poet would have had many colleagues in the English and Classics faculties who were teaching these courses to large numbers of students, and possibly experienced discussion about the theories and practices underpinning that aspect of the curriculum. His famously anxious personality might have been wrenched by whatever exposure he had during that time to the humanist ideals underlying the translation courses, especially the often explicit view that all of Western literature had blossomed from a single source, in Homer.

Lowell occasionally admitted openly to classical influences in his work, both thematic and linguistic. He wrote in the introduction to his volume *Near the Ocean* (1967): ‘The theme that connects my [poems here] is Rome, the greatness and horror of her Empire’,⁸³ and also revealed in an interview: ‘I [once] did a monologue that started as a translation of Virgil and then was completely rewritten, and there are buried translations in several other poems’.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Lowell made frequent comments about Classics in his essays and conversation, stating his long-standing fascination with one aspect of classical literature or another,⁸⁵ or exposing his enthusiasm for ancient poetry in lively published

⁸¹ For Lowell’s classical reading, see Mariani (1994), 157, 176 and 428, and Hamilton (2005), 202, 228 and 298.

⁸² Mariani (1994), 225.

⁸³ Bidart & Gewanter (2003), 381.

⁸⁴ Seidel (1961), 26.

⁸⁵ E.g. His well-known statement in the *Paris Review* interview: ‘You take almost any really good Roman poet – Juvenal, or Virgil, or Propertius, Catullus – he’s much more raw and direct than anything in English, and yet he has this blocklike formality. The Roman frankness interests me’ (Seidel (1961), 25).

analysis.⁸⁶ Most of all, the constant thread of references to ancient writers and contexts in his letters shows that the classics formed a conscious layer of the poet's literary awareness.⁸⁷

Homer stands out as a particularly prominent presence in Lowell's prose statements and poetic allusions.⁸⁸ The poet seems to have considered him an untouchable force of nature, writing in a late essay 'Epics' (1977) (which discusses Homer, Vergil, Milton, Dante and Melville): 'Homer is blinding Greek sunlight; Vergil is dark, narrow, morbid, mysterious, and artistic. He fades in translation, unlike Homer, who barely survives'.⁸⁹ In other words, the original epic poet is an unstable element, too unique and rare to bear transmission. Lowell also associated anxiety – and the freedom from anxiety that a writer at the dawn of Western civilisation would have enjoyed – with his Greek precursor: 'Homer – hexameters must have slid from his tongue, as easily and artfully as Shakespeare's last blank verse. He had no necessity or license to vary meter, and had less anxiety than even Walt Whitman for the triumphs of overcurious craft. This and narrative genius were his simplicities to celebrate the cycle of Greek radiance, barbarism, and doom with the terrible clairvoyance of a prophet'.⁹⁰

The prophetic source of poetry preoccupied Lowell, who believed that a poem was a revelation, not a creation. Seamus Heaney quoted Lowell expressing this view: '“A poem is an event”, [Lowell] declared to his classes, “not the record of an event”’, and also, ‘“I'm sure that writing isn't a craft, that is, something for which you learn the skills and go on turning out. It must come from some deep impulse, deep inspiration”’.⁹¹ This ensures that poetic composition is never guaranteed or controlled, but must be anxiously awaited. In addition, the

⁸⁶ E.g. Lowell's spirited review of a 1955 translation of the *Metamorphoses* (Giroux (1987), 152-60): 'Ovid is different. [...] His hexameters, his sentences, and his sense have furiously separate existences; they come at each other on foot, on horseback, with swords, forks, and nets, like gladiators they grapple for the kill, and then [...] there is harmony' (156).

⁸⁷ E.g. Hamilton (2005), 4, 16, 22, 77, 82, 98, 120, 121, 122, 124, 126, 127, 129, 130, 202, 222, 228, 285, 298, 400, 487, 520 and 521.

⁸⁸ See especially Lowell's lyric receptions of the *Iliad* ('The Killing of Lykaon', 'Achilles to the dying Lykaon'), and the *Odyssey* ('Penelope', 'Odysseus', 'Returning', 'Walks', 'Homecoming' and 'Ulysses and Circe'). For references to Virgil, see the poems 'Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid', 'The First Sunday in Lent', 'The Death of the Sheriff' and 'Between the Porch and the Altar'. For a catalogue of Lowell's classical references in general, see Talbot (2006).

⁸⁹ Giroux (1987), 219.

⁹⁰ Giroux (1987), 213-14.

⁹¹ Heaney (1988), 129.

expectations of Lowell's privileged family weighed upon him in light of his vocation.

Heaney, again, observed this dynamic:

[The] decorum [of *Life Studies* (1959), Lowell's dramatic volume that launched the Confessional mode], the book's technical mastery and its drive towards impersonality [despite being unguarded], are as much part of Lowell's birthright as his patronymic. As an artist, he was the proper Bostonian with his back to a wall of tradition. His poetic art, however self-willed it might on occasion be, could never escape from an innate demand that it should not just be a self-indulgence. There had to be something surgical in the incisions he made, something professional and public-spirited in the exposure. The whole thing was a test, of himself and of the resources of poetry. [...] Lowell strove to hold his own by mastering the classical, English, European and American poetic canons; he also strove to outstrip the level best of his peers by swerves that were all his own: doctrinal, ancestral, political –⁹²

or, in the case of his engagement with Homer, canonical.

Critics agree that Lowell went about assuaging these various tensions by concerted seeking, experimenting, actively fitting himself into various moulds to find his place within the tradition.⁹³ Evidence exists in Lowell's archived notebooks of his practice of copying out and imitating diverse models, including the works of Tate, John Crowe Ransom, William Carlos Williams, Eliot, Pound, Roethke, Milton, Melville and the Romantics – an exercise that Lowell described as 'growing out of admiration', and that his most recent biographer identified as an attempt to 'locate his own voice'.⁹⁴ The contemporaneous critic Irvin Ehrenpreis confirmed that 'Lowell has said it was hard for him to find a subject and a language of his own', and contended:

When he wrote his earlier works, the poet tried to give them importance by starting from the great moral issues or crises of history and then matching those with themes derived from his private ordeals. [...] As if to show there were no limits to his ambition, Lowell now set about [in *Imitations* (1961), his volume of free translations] discovering his own qualities in the whole range of European literature. Having projected his experiences as a human being upon the history of the twentieth century [in his volume *History* (1973)], he now projected his identity as an artist upon the meaning of 'poetry'; for he began producing free adaptations or 'imitations' of the work of a dozen and a half poets from Homer to Montale. [...] In fact, of course, *Imitations* is Lowell's attempt to find his voice in the high places of literature, to fashion retrospectively a tradition for his accomplishment. He is legitimizing his progeny, drawing up a genealogical tree.⁹⁵

⁹² Heaney (1988), 131-2. Here Heaney blends Bloom's idea of subconscious 'swerves' with the possibility of intentionality.

⁹³ E.g. Ehrenpreis (1965), 82; Vogler (1969), 59; Axelrod & Deese (1986), 52; Williamson (1995), 2; and Axelrod (1999), 252.

⁹⁴ Seidel (1961), 35, and Mariani (1994), 51.

⁹⁵ Ehrenpreis (1965), 88, 92.

If Lowell's early work (intricately allusive, severely formal) demonstrates an 'anxious majesty',⁹⁶ a state of excessive striving, in which the poet had not yet mastered his nervousness about securing a foothold in literary history; and his middle work (personal, experimental, wide-ranging) reveals that the search is sustained, unremitting; then his final efforts arrive at last at a posture of 'patrician repose', emanating assurance, buoyancy and poise.⁹⁷ Late Lowell has finally purged his self-doubts through years of poetic trials, taken possession of his strong stylistic voice and come to terms with his distinctive poetic program – nowhere more clearly than in the fascinating poem 'Ulysses and Circe' (1977).

This six-part lyric is the first poem in Lowell's final volume *Day by Day* (1977) (published in the year of his death),⁹⁸ and is in contact with the *Odyssey* through an extensive web of quotations, in which Lowell repeats elements from epic text in exactly parallel ways in his own poem. These include (in Part I) the poet's introduction to the piece, in the pose of a heroic narrator recalling his trials ('Why should I renew his infamous sorrow?', echoing *Aen.* 2.3); the line '*Myrmidons, Spartans, soldier of dire Ulysses...*' (a direct translation of *Aen.* 2.7, which perhaps explains Lowell's choice of the Roman name for the hero 'Ulysses', after Virgil); (in Part II) 'she lies beside him' (κατέλεξα, *Od.* 12.35); (in Part IV) 'she stands, / her hair intricate' (a slight variation on ἔστιν δ' εἰνὶ θύρησι θεᾶς καλλιπλοκάμοιο, *Od.* 10.310); 'on his walk to the ship' (βῆν δ' ἰέναι ἐπὶ νῆα θοῆν, *Od.* 10.407); (and in Part VI) 'dusty, noontime road' (ὁδὸν κάτα παιπαλόεσσαν, *Od.* 17.204); 'twenty years ago' (ἑικοστῷ ἐνιαυτῷ, *Od.* 17.327); 'convivial' (a concise reproduction in one word of the atmosphere in *Od.* 17.260-71); and 'uninvited' (πτωχὸν δ' οὐκ ἄν τις καλέοι τρύξοντα ἔαυτόν, *Od.* 17.387). In his essay on the poem, Robert Fitzgerald suggested that Lowell's repeated image of Odysseus 'circling' is itself a straightforward reference to the original character: '[Part VI]

⁹⁶ Heaney (1988), 139.

⁹⁷ Heaney (1988), 139.

⁹⁸ Although Lowell employs symmetrical, classical structures elsewhere (e.g. in his volume *Imitations*, which arguably reproduces the arrangement of Virgil's *Eclogues*, as I proposed in Chapter 3 of my Oxford M.Phil. thesis, 'The Classicism of Robert Frost and Robert Lowell' (2009)), the division of this poem reflects no noticeable symmetry in relation to the *Odyssey*. If anything, the arrangement of its parts is soon revealed to be lopsided, with just one section (Part I) given to the early stages of Odysseus' journey (*Od.* 1-9), four (Parts II-IV) devoted to the tryst with Circe (*Od.* 10-12) and just one (Part VI) to the homecoming (*Od.* 13-24). Perhaps this imbalance is one of many signals that Lowell is radically upending and unravelling the *Odyssey*'s measured teleology, in this revision.

opens with a good statement about the received idea of Ulysses: in contrast with Achilles, whose actions and speech are direct, Ulysses in his story characteristically goes crabwise, circling in action and speech to size up situations and people'.⁹⁹

However, the imagery and structure of this modern poem more often amount, instead, to a severe rewriting of the Homeric epic, which Lowell achieves using three techniques central to his fully realised poetics. First of all, the poet interpolates depressing and psychologising imagery into his 'Homeric' scenes, adding material that is not present in the original text, but which is introduced in Lowell's version to illustrate the loneliness of exile, the sorrow of aging, the unexpected pain of being forgotten in one's absence and the inevitable rage that springs from these miseries – all qualities of Odysseus' character and experience that are perhaps latent in Homer, but reach full expression in Lowell. Perhaps arising from his own experience with manic depression, this tendency to enhance the psychological drama and clarity of his ancient sources is marked throughout the poet's output.

Part II of 'Ulysses and Circe', for instance, describes Odysseus waking up in Circe's bed (a moment that is skipped over in Homer, but could be inserted between *Od.* 10.347 and 348); but in an inversion of the traditional aubade, Lowell's scene does not depict Odysseus as a lover luxuriating in his mistress and her bower, but rather reveals the disconnection and discomfort of his forced cohabitation with Circe. The rising sun becomes an ominous 'red bonfire,/ weakly rattling in the lower branches – / that eats like a locust and leaves the tree entire'. The bed is figured as a dark prison in the brightening light: 'The blinds give/ bars of sunlight, bars of shade,/ but the latter predominate/ over the sincerity of her sybaritic bed'. In her essay on the poem, Helen Vendler read this dawn-scene as a picture of sexual frustration, in which the 'aging Ulysses has only momentary sexual powers' (giving up after 'ten minutes perhaps' (Part II)), and 'Circe, sleepy, excuses herself from love':¹⁰⁰

She lies beside him,
a delicious somnolent log. She says,
'Such wonderful things are being said to me –
I'm such an old sleeper, I can't respond.'

⁹⁹ Fitzgerald (1977), 30.

¹⁰⁰ Vendler (1977), 17.

Another disconcerting element, absent in Homer but added in Lowell, is the poetic ‘to and fro’ sustained throughout this new version of the *Odyssey* – the contradiction of things proposed and negated in equal measure, one step forward, one step back – and the resulting incoherence of Odysseus’ actions and experiences, which, through this endless poetic tide, cancel themselves out in the end. In Part IV, Lowell describes the hero’s return to Ithaca:

On foot and visible,
he walks from Long Wharf home.
Nobody in Ithaca knows him,
and yet he is too much remarked.
His knees run quicker than his feet,
his held-in mouth is puffy,
his eye is a traveled welcomer.
He looks for his lighthouse,
once so aggressively white –
a landmark, now a marina.
How white faced and unlucky-looking
he was twenty years ago,
even on the eve of his embarkation
and carnival of glory,
when he enticed Penelope
to dance herself to coma in his arms [...]
Her then unspectacled eyes were stars –
a cornered rabbit [...]

Vendler catalogued the paradoxes in this passage:

For every given in Ulysses’ approach, there is a taking-away: nobody knows him yet he is too much remarked; his knees go forward but his feet hold him back; his mouth is held in but the lips are puffy; the lighthouse was a landmark but now there is a marina; earlier male glory induced female sexual coma; a dash toward is paradoxically the maneuver of a cornered prey.¹⁰¹

This interpolated poetic contradiction of ‘to and fro’, taking steps and then doubling back on the tracks, heightens the sense of pained frustration suffered by Lowell’s Odysseus. Vendler remarked further that the paradox of ‘toward, back; toward, back’ is a technique Lowell had applied before, in poems like ‘Even Such’ (1969) and ‘Going to and fro’ (1964).¹⁰² Perhaps its use in this Homeric story, then, is a gesture of Lowell Lowell-ising his competitor, rewriting the canonical text in the image of his own psychologically despondent, incongruent work.

In a second technique of revision, the modern poet riffs on imagery from the *Odyssey*, alternately subduing or inflating Homeric language. Examples of inflated phrasing include

¹⁰¹ Vendler (1977), 21.

¹⁰² Vendler (1977), 21.

‘uxorious’ (intensified from the formulaic phrase *λιλαιομένη πόσιν εἶναι*, ‘eager to make me her husband’, describing the designs of both Calypso and Circe toward Odysseus, *Od.* 9.30, 32); ‘sybaritic bed’ (for the less opulent *περικαλλέος εὐνής*, ‘beautiful bed’, 10.347, 480); ‘whining, greasy animals’ and ‘retarded animals’ (for the simply technical description of Odysseus’ men transformed into swine, *Od.* 10.239-40); ‘hysterical submission’ (for another formulaic response, *ἡμῖν δ’ αὖτ’ ἐπεπείθετο θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ*, ‘and our proud hearts were persuaded’, at *Od.* 10.466, and in an almost identical form at 10.406); and ‘condescending [suitors]’ (for the vaguely positive *μνηστήρας ἀγασούς*, ‘proud suitors’, *Od.* 17.325). Examples of muted language include ‘the couch’ (for the ornate silver chair, *θρόνου ἀργυροήλου/ καλοῦ δαιδαλέου· ὑπὸ δὲ θρηῆνυς ποσὶν ἦεν*, ‘a silver-studded chair, a beautiful, finely-worked chair with a footstool underneath’, in *Od.* 10.314-5 and 366-7), and the brief line ‘he is too much remarked’ (glossing over the graphic and unpleasant assault of the goatherd Melanthius on the apparent beggar Odysseus in *Od.* 17.212-55).

Lowell also markedly shuffles Homeric descriptors, reassigning them to new contexts in his version of the story, with the effect of creating an unsettling, topsy-turvy re-experience of the original passage, haunted with echoes of the original, but from different, unexpected and disconcerting registers and angles.¹⁰³ For instance, in Part II of the poem, Lowell’s Odysseus observes Circe’s sleeping body: ‘He sees the familiar bluish-brown river/ dangle down her flat young forearm’, an image, linking a girl to a coursing river, that recalls Homer’s description of Circe’s handmaids (*ἀμφίπολοι*) in *Odyssey* 10.350-1: *γίγονται δ’ ἄρα ταί γ’ ἔκ τε κρυνέων ἀπὸ τ’ ἀλσέων/ ἔκ θ’ ἱερῶν ποταμῶν, οἳ τ’ εἰς ἄλαδε προρέοθσι* (‘they are the children of springs, and woods, and sacred rivers flowing down to the sea’). Also, Lowell defines Circe in Part IV as embodying a ‘mongrel harmony/ of the irreconcilable’, meaning in this context that she balances conflicting qualities in her nature; however, the phrase ‘mongrel harmony’ also evokes, from the original episode in Homer, the fawning lions and wolves (transformed men) that greet Odysseus’ followers when they first arrive at Circe’s house (*Od.*

¹⁰³ Heaney (1988) called this poem ‘kaleidoscopic’, and comprised of ‘fragments’ (143).

10.210-19), harmonious beasts.¹⁰⁴ In a dramatic monologue in Part V, Lowell's Odysseus reflects on his endless and exhausting voyage: 'I have grown bleak-boned with survival – / I who hoped to leave the earth/ younger than I came'. This is an impossible goal – except that it did, in fact, already occur in Homer: at *Odyssey* 10.395-6, when Circe obeys Odysseus' wish and transforms his comrades from swine back into men, whereupon they are younger than they were before (ἄνδρες δ' ἄψ ἐγένοντο νεώτεροι ἢ πάρος ἦσαν,/ καὶ πολὺ καλλίονες καὶ μείζονες εἰσοράασθαι, 'they became men again, younger than before, and looking much taller and more handsome'). Perhaps Lowell's Odysseus, in his later rumination, is recalling this unlikely event from his original story – or even foretelling in Lowell the gratification that his wish eventually receives in Homer, as if the later poet in fact predates his rival. Finally, in Part IV of Lowell's poem, Odysseus leaves Circe's island, and, on the way to the coast, observes leaves falling from a tree:

On his walk to the ship,
 a solitary tree suddenly
 drops half its leaves;
 they stay green on the ground.
 Other trees hold. In a day or two,
 their leaves also will fall,
 like his followers,
 stained by their hesitation
 prematurely brown.

Leaves falling 'like his followers' remind the reader (and Lowell's Odysseus, perhaps) of the Homeric character Elpenor, who literally falls from a height in Circe's compound and perishes on the morning of departure (*Od.* 10.551-60).¹⁰⁵ All of these images derive from Homer, but all are swapped into new contexts in Lowell, with a disorienting, hall-of-mirrors effect, a familiar text reflected back from multiple, startling angles, perhaps enacting Odysseus' unhappy, unsettling travels in a more concise, precise, flamboyant way than Homer did.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzgerald (1977) noted of this confluence: 'a mongrel harmony (mongrel recalling the whining animals) of irreconcilable natures, or so we might put it recalling the ancient story: human and other-than-human' (28). 'Harmony' also faintly recalls Circe's singing as she paces before the loom, which Odysseus' men first hear as they approach her palace (*Od.* 10.220-2).

¹⁰⁵ Fitzgerald (1997), 29, observed this same correspondence. The image of falling leaves also recalls *Il.* 6.146, cited in the section on Frost.

Finally, Lowell uses structural rewriting (excisions and shifts) to change the essence of this story dramatically, from pleasant journey to tortured exile. Like Frost's version, 'Ulysses and Circe' encompasses the whole arc of the *Odyssey*. By distilling the rambling epic into three representative episodes, Lowell creates a tight narrative trajectory that begins in brutality (Odysseus' destruction of Troy in the Trojan War, Part I), proceeds through frustration (his captivity on Circe's island, Parts II-V) and culminates in rage (his return to a taunting and forgetful Ithaca, Part VI), with nothing meaningful in between. As Vendler observed, Odysseus' empty sufferings in Lowell, dominating and defining his life up until the moment of his murderous revenge on the suitors, explain in part an otherwise unfathomable act: 'That the actions themselves – Circe's indifferent seduction, Ulysses' irritable leave-taking, Penelope's complacent salon-holding – assert nothing of worth justifies, if anything can, Ulysses' final killer descent'.¹⁰⁶

Lowell also shifts the start- and end- points of the story: 'Ulysses and Circe' begins slightly before the beginning of the *Odyssey* (at the end of the Trojan War), and ends slightly before its end (with Odysseus poised to strike the suitors). This re-framing focuses the reader's attention first of all, and at last, on Odysseus' history of and capacity for violence. Vendler wrote of this adjusted structure: 'Tennyson's Ulysses could not have murdered the suitors, and Du Bellay's Ulysses would have forgotten them. In Lowell, everything that has happened from that first dawn [in Circe's bed in Part II] rises to the final violence [in Part VI], foreshadowed by Ulysses' destruction of Troy [in Part I]'.¹⁰⁷ Like Lowell's, Homer's Odysseus does, of course, murder the suitors; but that action does not define him, as it is displaced in the final books of the epic with honourable and peaceful actions, so that the reader can begin to overlook that the forgiven, celebrated lover, father and son of *Odyssey* 23 and 24 is also the monster of *Odyssey* 22.

In Lowell's version, the story simply ends with the monster, who is given the vivid alter-identity of a shark in a modern Homeric simile. Perhaps this image amplifies two existing similes at the start of *Odyssey* 20, depicting Odysseus striving to contain his anger

¹⁰⁶ Vendler (1977), 24.

¹⁰⁷ Vendler (1977), 18.

temporarily as he plots his revenge. Lying in the entryway, a beggar in his own house, Odysseus hears the laughter of the maids, traitorously cavorting with the suitors, and becomes a bristling dog in his rage:

κραδίη δέ οἱ ἔνδον ὑλάκει.
ὥς δὲ κύων ἀμαλῆσι περὶ σκυλάκεσσι βεβῶσα
ἄνδρ' ἀγνοήσασ' ὑλάει μέμονέν τε μάχεσθαι,
ὥς ῥα τοῦ ἔνδον ὑλάκει ἀγαιομένου κακὰ ἔργα: (*Od.* 20.13-16)

His heart growled within him, as when a bitch standing over her soft puppies growls at a man she does not know and is ready to attack him: so he growled inwardly in outrage at this wickedness.

Several lines later, Odysseus is shown tossing and turning, deliberating on his strike against the suitors, and is likened to broiling meat, another quite animalistic image:

ἐν στήθεσσι καθαπτόμενος φίλον ἦτορ·
τῷ δὲ μάλ' ἐν πείσῃ κραδίη μένε τετληυῖα
νωλεμέως· ἀτὰρ αὐτὸς ἐλίσσετο ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα.
ὥς δ' ὅτε γαστέρ' ἀνήρ πολέος πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο,
ἐμπλείην κνίσης τε καὶ αἵματος, ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα
αἰόλλη, μάλ' αὖ δ' ὠκα λιλαιέται ὀπτηθῆναι,
ὥς ἄρ' ὁ γ' ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα ἐλίσσετο μερμηρίζων,
ὄππῃ δὴ μνηστῆρσιν ἀναιδέσι χεῖρας ἐφήσει,
μοῦνος ἐὼν πολέσι. (*Od.* 20.22-30)

But he kept himself tossing this way and that, as when a man cooking a paunch full of fat and blood over a fierce fire turns it round and round to have it roasted as soon as he can. So he tossed to and fro, pondering how he could indeed lay his hands on the shameless suitors, when he was alone and they so many.

Lowell's simile for Odysseus about to strike, evicted from the house by the suitors, but ominously 'circling' outside, is especially – characteristically – vivid and brutal, yet again an intensification of his epic model:

He circles as a shark circles
visibly behind the window –
flesh-proud, sore-eyed, scar-proud,
a vocational killer
in the machismo of senility,
foretasting the apogee of mayhem –
breaking water to destroy his wake.
He is oversize. To her suitors,
he is Tom, Dick or Harry –
his gills are pleated and aligned –
unnatural ventilation-vents
closed by a single lever
like cells in a jail –
ten years fro and ten years to.

These are the final lines of the poem, which leave Odysseus where he began, in a prison of discontent and inevitability. This conclusion both portends a sadistic, miserable turn, and

simultaneously offers no actual resolution, no relief, no evidence of progress or fulfillment of epic teleology. Instead, Lowell ‘circles’ the *Odyssey* back upon itself, redirecting the famously end-centred narrative so that it begins and concludes in moments of the same bleak, violent open-endedness, the prelude a mirror image of the finale, reflecting one another in endless reduplication. Heaney wrote artfully about Lowell’s general pattern of endings:

Revelation rather than demonstration was the end he desires. ‘The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.’ ‘Your old-fashioned tirade – / Loving, rapid, merciless – / breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.’ ‘You usually won – / motionless/ as a lizard in the sun.’ Closing lines like these would tremble in the centre of the ear like an arrow in a target and set the waves of suggestion rippling. A sense of something utterly completed vied with a sense of something startled into scope and freedom. The reader was permitted the sensation of a whole meaning simultaneously clicking shut and breaking open.¹⁰⁸

In just this way, ‘Ulysses and Circe’ ‘breaks open’ even as it ‘clicks shut’, creating a new teleology of unhinged, cyclical irresolution, in the style of Robert Lowell.

That this poem embodies Lowell’s strengths is certain. It is, like so much of his best work, an exercise in extreme, human imagery and poetic exaction, and a proof that rage is a legitimate subject for lyric poetry. Heaney described the poet’s obsession with explosive, vivid language:

Lowell always had an inclination to launch [...] single lines and phrases across the sky of the poem and indeed, in [his] blank sonnets[, for example,] had so tried to make poems blaze line by line that the reader could feel at times he was out bareheaded in a meteor shower.¹⁰⁹

Vendler suggested that ‘Ulysses and Circe’ is a culminating effort in the poet’s career-long ambition to explore rage in lyric form:

No lyric poet except Lowell, so far as I know, has given rage so constant a right in poetry. Rather than making Lowell peculiar, his violence, barely repressed and often erupting, casts a backward question to his predecessors in lyric, asking why rage has so seldom appeared before. It is present enough in epics, novels, and plays, but the lyric forms scarcely have allowed for it. In that history and science of feeling which poetry (according to Wordsworth) takes on as its task, Lowell has made a certain trajectory his own: the curve which begins in possibility and ends grimly in necessity. Here [in ‘Ulysses and Circe’] a grand human voyage, a grand exploratory adventure, narrows to the descent of a predatory shark closing in for the kill.¹¹⁰

Behind all this, the poem is an abridgement of the *Odyssey*, another sign that Lowell was, in part, an anxious and belated inheritor, rewriting his forerunner to reflect his own identity as a poet, encircling the daunting epic within a normative lyric poem. A comparative reading of

¹⁰⁸ Heaney (1988), 131.

¹⁰⁹ Heaney (1988), 142.

¹¹⁰ Vendler (1977), 18.

the texts offers, too, a reminder of the very dark elements in the Homeric version. That this new *Odyssey* encloses all of the hero's adventures between occasions of violence, which appear then to define him and his story, first and last, is extreme; but Odysseus' ruthlessness is present in Homer too, and becomes vividly remembered and released by reading Lowell. In distilling the hero's life between cruelties into one prolonged scene of frustration and disappointment, Lowell also suggests that deep psychological suffering underpins Odysseus' eventual outburst, an explanation that is perhaps implicit in the original story, but becomes uniquely accessible in 'Ulysses and Circe', through Lowell's genius for the raw exploration of mania. Harold Bloom declared of mature poets: 'Poets, by the time they have grown strong, do not read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves'.¹¹¹ Perhaps Lowell read himself, already latent in Homer, and unleashed what he found there.

In reducing Homer in this way, Frost and Lowell had many classical predecessors, who perhaps also served as models. Both Hellenistic poets, like Theocritus and Callimachus, and Augustan epic poets, including Virgil and Ovid, engaged in various programmes of 'miniaturising' and 'subsuming' larger or more ambitious works within their own new versions.¹¹² In perhaps the most famous example, Virgil created in the *Aeneid* 'a storehouse of literature, filled with references and allusions not only to other epics, but also to a vast range of different genres from tragedy, lyric, elegy and epigram[,] to history and ethnography'.¹¹³ Rebecca Armstrong suggests a link with Bloom's theory:

This very inclusiveness could be said to mark the poet's ambition. [...] If we regard the *Aeneid* as building its own kind of literary empire, we can see how Virgil might circumvent the anxiety of inspiration, the discomfort of belatedness. Of course other poets got there first. Indeed, they are necessary building blocks for the work. But the result is a poem greater than its parts.¹¹⁴

Above all, Virgil's belated epic incorporates, and inverts the order of, the Iliadic and Odyssean plot lines, with *Aeneid* 1-6 representing the hero's journey, and *Aeneid* 7-12

¹¹¹ Bloom (1973), 19.

¹¹² E.g. Theocritus *Id.* 7, containing the entire arc of a heroic journey in a short pastoral poem, and *Id.* 11, inverting a Homeric episode, on which see Prauscello (2007).

¹¹³ Armstrong (2006), 131. See also Harrison (2007), Chapter 7, on the functioning of 'guest' genres within the *Aeneid*.

¹¹⁴ Armstrong (2006), 131-2.

recording a military reckoning between leaders. As Armstrong puts it: ‘With Homer [...], the emphasis is on swallowing whole’.¹¹⁵ Virgil essentially undertook, and accomplished, on a large scale, what Frost and Lowell attempted in lyric in the twentieth century.

The modern poets may also have had a glaring, more recent example for their epic structuring, in the accomplishment of James Joyce, whose novel *Ulysses* (1922) initiated ‘a stratagem often taken to be definitively Modernist: the use of an ancient fable to structure and resonate with a twentieth-century narrative’,¹¹⁶ in that case the story of the *Odyssey*, and its possible correspondences with turn-of-the-century Dublin. T.S. Eliot famously proclaimed new hope for modern literature, in reviewing Joyce’s ‘epic’:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.¹¹⁷

As epic reductions, both ‘The Generations of Men’ and ‘Ulysses and Circe’ engage in this modernist experiment, undertaking to include the entire *Odyssey* in a single short poem. That these versions condense Homer’s epic within the poets’ characteristic modes is a resolution of anxiety against their iconic precursor, by subsuming him in a modern and personal form. However, although both works succeed in their chosen styles (rural, conversational narrative; vivid, maniacal lyric), reproduce the entire sweep of the Homeric plot and even imprint to an extent on passages from the original text (the encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa now contains traces of the rustic language and country rainstorm of Frost, for me; and Odysseus’ dismal exile and vengeful brutality are forever heightened by the high vibrancy of Lowell), there is defeat in this apparent victory. These lyric poems, ostensibly triumphant containments of Homer, are also propped up from within by his scaffolding – permanent marks of unease, betraying the ‘reduction’ of the belated poets’ ambitions and achievements, their indulged unwillingness to write a fully independent or full-length modern epic to rival the *Odyssey*

¹¹⁵ Armstrong (2006), 154.

¹¹⁶ Kermode (1975), 137.

¹¹⁷ Eliot (1923), 177-8.

directly.¹¹⁸ Instead of facing Homer freely on his own terms, Frost and Lowell reduce him to theirs.

¹¹⁸ This partial defeat was especially pronounced for Wallace Stevens, who finally undertook his lyric reception of Homer ('The World as Meditation') late in his life, as an eleventh-hour recourse, after years of failed striving to write a proper long poem, on which see DuBois & Lentricchia (2003b).

DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE

References to Homer and Virgil in American Poems Since 1914

This catalogue records direct references to aspects of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, in American poetry from the long modernist period. The list includes almost 400 poems, from more than 175 American poets. The poems date from 1914 to 2014, and the vast majority of the poets experienced at first hand the elite undergraduate education system in the United States in the mid-twentieth century (especially the translation survey courses), either as students, professors, or both. (The few listed here who did not were possibly influenced in their approach at second hand, by receptions published by those who did.)

Poets are listed here alphabetically by surname, for ease of reference, and poems are listed under each poet, chronologically by publication date (or approximate date of composition, if the poem was not originally published). Less prominent poets (mostly still living), whose date of birth has not been possible to discover, are still included without that marker.

The catalogue includes every example of Homeric-Virgilian reference in modern American poetry that I encountered in my research, however systematic or brief, complex or straightforward, and no matter how major or minor the poet. Most of these poems are short, lyric versions; but some famous, lengthier American receptions are listed here also (including versions by H.D., Hart Crane and James Merrill).

In the right margin are annotations showing the origins of the reference, either in relation to one of the original epics (with book and line numbers given where possible), or as a general reference ('ref.') to one of the works, or to one of the poets, Homer ('H.') or Virgil ('V.'). If a poem mentions a character or symbolic place, this reference is also given. Some of the annotations for the poems of H.D. are taken from E. Gregory's catalogue in her book *H.D. and Hellenism* (1997).

For these same texts cross-referenced further by theme, poetic style and cultural-historical context, please refer to the footnotes in Chapters 1-6 of the thesis.

Virginia Hamilton Adair (1913-2004)

'Pity Ulysses' – *Ants on the Melon* (1996) *Od.* 10; Odysseus, Circe

Conrad Aiken (1889-1973)

'But you and I, Charybdis, are not new' – Part 10, *Preludes for Memnon* (1931) *Od.*; *Aen.* 6

Nadya Aisenberg (1928-1999)

'The Spirit of Ruin' – *Leaving Eden* (1995) *Il.*; Achilles

Joan Aleshire (1938-)

‘Nausikaa’ – in *Poetry*, December 1985 *Od.* 6; Nausicaa, Odysseus

Doug Anderson (1943-)

‘The War’ – *The Moon Reflected Fire* (1994) *Il.* 3; Paris, Helen, Aphrodite
‘Spoken by the Sentry at Achilles’s Tent’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Achilles, Briseis
‘First Blood’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hector
‘Descent’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Achilles
‘Homecoming’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus
‘A Bar in Argos’ – (ibid.) *Il.*
‘Homer Does Not Mention Him’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; H. ref.

Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959)

‘Telemachus Muses’ – *You Who Have Dreams* (1925) *Od.* 11.121-3; Telemachus, Odysseus

Herman Asarnow (-)

‘For Nausicaa: On Searching for a Poem by Someone Else to Send to You’ – in
Classical Outlook, 1999 *Od.*; Nausicaa

Joseph Auslander (1897-1965)

‘Cyclops’ Eye’ – *Cyclops’ Eye* (1926) *Od.* 9; Polyphemus
‘Ulysses in Autumn’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 24; Odysseus

Robert Bagg (1935-)

‘Penelope’ – in *The Atlantic*, August 1957 *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope, the Suitors
‘Venus and Nausicaa’ – in *Poetry*, January 1960 *Od.*; Nausicaa
‘Two Ballads from Nausicaa’ – *Madonna of the Cello* (1961) *Od.* 6; Nausicaa, Odysseus

Lisa Barnett

‘Penelope-in-Progress’ – in *Classical Outlook*, 2000 *Od.*; Penelope

R.L. Barth

‘Prologue: Reading the *Iliad*’ – *Forced-Marching for the Styx* (1983) *Il.*; Hector

Marvin Bell (1937-)

‘Where is Odysseus from and What Was He before He Left for the Trojan War?’ –
in *The Missouri Review*, Winter 1981 *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Study Guide for the *Odyssey* – *New and Selected Poems* (1987) *Od.* ref.

Stephen Vincent Benét (1898-1943)

- ‘The First Vision of Helen’ – *Heavens and Earth* (1920) *Il.*; Helen, Menelaus
‘The Last Vision of Helen’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen

Thomas G. Bergin (1905-1987)

- ‘Calypso’ – in *The Sewanee Review*, 1978 *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus, Penelope

Frank Bidart (1939-)

- ‘Vergil, Aeneid 1.1-33’ – *Golden State* (1973) *Aen.* proem

John Peale Bishop (1892-1944)

- ‘And When the Net was Unwound Venus was Found Ravelled with Mars’ –
Now With His Love (1933) *Od.* 8.266-366
‘Experience the West’ – *Minute Particulars* (1936) *Aen.* 2; Aeneas, Anchises
‘Hecuba’s Rage’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hecuba, Paris; Troy
‘Why They Waged War’ – (ibid.) *Il.*
‘Whom the Gods Love’ – (ibid.) *Il.*
‘Farewell to Many Cities’ – (ibid.) *Il.*

Diann Blakely (1957-2014)

- ‘Circe’ – *Hurricane Walk* (1992) *Od.* 10; Circe
‘Polyphemus’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.* 9; Polyphemus

Robert Bly (1926-)

- ‘A Poem Beginning with a Line by Seal Scholars’ – *Eating the Honey of Words* (1999) ...V. ref.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

- ‘The Anniad’ – *Annie Allen* (1949) *Aen.*

Olga Broumas (1949-)

- ‘Circe’ – *Beginning with O* (1977) *Od.* 10; Circe
‘Calypso’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 5; Calypso

Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989)

- ‘The Odyssey of Big Boy’ – *Southern Road* (1932) *Od.*

Kenneth Burke (1897-1993)

‘Of Rome and Carthage’ – *Collected Poems* (1968) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas

Witter Bynner (1881-1968)

‘Circe’ – *Take Away the Darkness* (1947) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

Richard Cecil (-)

‘The Siren’ – in *Poetry*, October 1986 *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens

A.V. Christie (1963-)

‘Penelope in Spring’ – in *The Plum Review* *Od.*; Penelope

Nicholas Christopher (1951-)

‘Circe in Love’ – *Desperate Characters* (1988) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

‘Circe Revisited’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

John Ciardi (1916-1986)

‘Ulysses’ – *39 Poems* (1959) *Od.* 11.121-3; Odysseus, Penelope

Amy Clampitt (1920-1994)

‘Homer, A.D. 1982’ – *What the Light Was Like* (1985)
..... *Il.* 1, 2, 6.472-3; Odysseus, Chryses, Hector, Astyanax

Martha Collins (1940-)

‘Homecoming’ – in *The Southern Review* (1972) *Od.*; Penelope

Robert Cooperman

‘Telemachos after His Visit to Sparta, Searching for News of His Father, Odysseus’ – in
Classical Outlook, Summer 2000 *Od.*; Telemachos, Odysseus

‘Menelaos Watches Telemachos – Seeking News of his Father Odysseus –
Sail Away from Sparta’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Menelaos, Telemachos, Odysseus

‘Setting Sail from Sparta, One of Telemachos’ Shipmates Considers the Prince and
their Voyage’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachos

‘Telemachos after the Slaughter of the Suitors’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachos, Odysseus

‘Andromache as the Flames Consume Hector’ – in *Sewanee Review*, 2011
..... *Il.*; Andromache, Hector

‘Hector’s Ghost Consoles Andromache after She Fails to Kill Herself at His
Funeral Rites’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hector, Andromache

Gregory Corso (1930-2001)

‘Mortal Infliction’ – *The Happy Birthday of Death* (1960) *Od.* 9; Polyphemus, Odysseus

M.L. Coughlin

‘Penelope’s Dream’ – in *St. John’s Review*, Summer 1985 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

‘After Hecuba’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hecuba

Louis O. Coxe (1918-1993)

‘Ulysses at Twenty’ – in *The Last Hero* (1965) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope

‘Ulysses at Thirty’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Helen, Ajax, Achilles

‘Ulysses at Forty’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus

‘Ulysses at Fifty’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus

‘Ulysses at Sixty’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus, Circe, Nausicaa

‘Ulysses Dying’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus, Polyphemus; Troy

Hart Crane (1899-1932)

‘The Marriage of Faustus and Helen’ – *White Buildings* (1926) *Aen.*; Helen, Anchises

The Bridge (1930) *Aen.* proem

Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

‘The Black Christ’ – *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929) *Il.*; Patroclus

‘Sonnet’ – *The Medea and Other Poems* (1935) *Il.*; Achilles

J. V. Cunningham (1911-1985)

‘Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae’ – *The Judge is Fury* (1947) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas

Robert Darling

‘Penelope’ – in *Classical Outlook*, Winter 1997 *Od.*; Penelope

Donald Davidson (1893-1968)

‘Old Sailor’s Choice’ – *Poems* (1922-1961) *Od.* 10-12; Circe, Elpenor, Skylla, Charybdis

‘Gradual of the Northern Summer’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 6; Nausicaa

‘Lines for Allen Tate on his Sixtieth Anniversary’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2

‘Woodlands, 1956-1960’ – (ibid.) H. ref.

‘Late Answer: A Civil War Seminar’ – (ibid.) *Od.*

Peter Davison (1928-2004)

‘Castaway’ – *Pretending to Be Asleep* (1970) *Od.* 5; Odysseus

- ‘Calypso’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus
 ‘Words for My Father’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Odysseus
 ‘On Ithaca’ – *Barn Fever and Other Poems* (1981)
 *Od.*; Calypso, Circe, Nausicaa, Penelope, Odysseus, Polyphemus

Carl Dennis (1939-)

- ‘Ithaca’ – *Signs and Wonders* (1979) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
 ‘Hector’s Return’ – *The Outskirts of Troy* (1988)
 *Il.* 6.146 and 22; Hector, Achilles, Andromache, Astyanax, Priam; Troy
 ‘On the Way to School’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; H. ref.; Achilles, Priam; Troy, Ithaca
 ‘The Art of Virgil’ – in *Rhetoric Review*, 1994 *Aen.* 4; V. ref.; Aeneas, Dido
 ‘School Days’ – *Practical Gods* (2001) *Od.* 11.204-8; Odysseus
 ‘In the Short Term’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 3; H. ref.; Helen, Priam, Aphrodite; Troy

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886-1961)

- ‘*Odyssey*’ – among translations (1915-1920) *Od.* 1.1-98
 ‘Thetis’ – *Hymen* (1921) *Il.*; Thetis
 ‘Circe’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10.210-19; Circe, Odysseus
 ‘Cuckoo Song’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 5.59-62; Calypso
 ‘The Islands’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 2.494-760
 ‘Sea Heroes’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 8; *Il.* 2
 ‘Prayer’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 18.478-608
 ‘Helios’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 16.786-804
 ‘At Ithaca’ – *Heliadora* (1924) *Od.* 2.104-9; Penelope, Odysseus, Hector
 ‘Helen’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Calypso’ – among unpublished poems (1912-1944) *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus
 ‘A Dead Priestess Speaks’ – (ibid.) H. ref.
 ‘Why Have you Sought’ – (ibid.) *Il.* ref.
Helen in Egypt (1961) *Il.*; Helen, Achilles
 ‘Winter Love’ – *Hermetic Definition* (1972) *Od.*; Odysseus, Helen
 ‘Lethe’ – *Collected Poems* (1986) *Aen.* 6.703-52

Alan Dugan (1923-2003)

- ‘On Lines 69-70, Book IV, of Virgil’s *Aeneid*’ – *Poems Two* (1963) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas
 ‘Stentor and Mourning’ – in *Poetry*, 1972 *Il.* 5.780-92; Stentor, Hera, Patroclus, Achilles
 ‘At Circe’s Place’ – in *The Iowa Review*, 1973 *Od.* 10; Odysseus, Circe
 ‘Speech for Aeneas’ – *Poems Five* (1983) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas

Peter Kane Dufault (1923-)

- ‘Odysseus’ Song to Calypso’ – *Erotic Poetry: The Lyrics, Ballads, Idylls, and Epics of Love, Classical to Contemporary* (1963) *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus

Robert Duncan (1919-1988)

- ‘Achilles’ Song’ – *Bending the Bow* (1968) *Il.* 1.357-63, 413-18, 9.410-11; Achilles, Thetis
 ‘At the Loom’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; *Od.*; Circe, Achilles, Hector

- ‘The Moly Suite’ – *Ground Work: Before the War* (1984) *Od.* 5; Circe
- Richard Eberhart** (1904-2005)
- ‘The Return of Ulysses’ – *Reading the Spirit* (1936) *Od.*; Odysseus
- Terry Ehret** (1955-)
- ‘A Second Look at Penelope’ – *Lost Body* (1992) *Od.*; Penelope
- W.D. Ehrhart** (1948-)
- ‘Channel Fever’ – *Channel Fever* (1982) *Od.*; Sirens
- John Erskine** (1879-1951)
- ‘Paris, Helen’s Lover’ – *Collected Poems* (1922) *Il.*; Helen, Paris
- Rhina Espaillat** (1932-)
- ‘On the Walls’ – *Voices International* *Il.*; Helen, Paris
- Donald Finkel** (1929-2008)
- ‘The Sirens’ – *New Poets of England and America* (1957) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens
‘Odysseus’ – *The Clothing’s New Emperor* (1959) *Od.* 11.121-3; Odysseus
- Dudley Fitts** (1903-1968)
- ‘Priam’ – *Poems* (1937) *Il.*; Priam, Helen
‘This Country Road with the Engine Running’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 6.314
- Robert Fitzgerald** (1910-1985)
- ‘Threnos’ – *Poems: 1931-1935* *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Hellas’ – *In the Rose of Time* (1956) H. ref.
- John Gould Fletcher** (1886-1950)
- ‘On a Moral Triumph’ – *Parables* (1925) *Il.*; Helen, Menelaus
- Robert Frost** (1874-1963)
- ‘The Generations of Men’ – *North of Boston* (1914) *Od.* 6; *Il.* 6.146; Nausicaa

George Garrett (1929-2008)

‘Teiresias’ – *The Sleeping Gypsy and Other Poems* (1958) *Od.* 11; Tiresias

Amy Gerstler (1956-)

‘Siren’ – *Bitter Angel* (1997) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens

Brewster Ghiselin (1903-2002)

‘The Wheel’ – *Country of the Minotaur* (1970) *Aen.*; Palinurus
‘Answering a Letter from a Younger Poet’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

William Gibson (1948-)

‘Circe’ –in *Poetry*, 1949 *Od.* 10; Circe

Jack Gilbert (1925-2012)

‘The Plundering of Circe’ – *Monolithos: Poems 1962-82* *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

Louise Glück (1943-)

‘The Triumph of Achilles’ – *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) *Il.* 16ff.; Patroclus, Achilles
‘Penelope’s Song’ – *Meadowlands* (1996) *Od.*; Penelope
‘Parable of the King’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Ithaca’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope
‘Telemachus’ Detachment’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Penelope, Odysseus
‘Parable of the Hostages’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 2
‘Telemachus’ Guilt’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Penelope, Odysseus
‘Telemachus’ Kindness’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Penelope, Odysseus
‘Siren’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 12.184-91; a Siren
‘Telemachus’ Dilemma’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Penelope, Odysseus
‘Circe’s Power’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus
‘Telemachus’ Fantasy’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Odysseus
‘Odysseus’ Decision’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Circe’s Torment’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus, Penelope
‘Circe’s Grief’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus, Penelope; Ithaca
‘Penelope’s Stubbornness’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope
‘Telemachus’ Confession’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus
‘Telemachus’ Burden’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Penelope
‘The Queen of Carthage’ – *Vita Nova* (1999) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas
‘Roman Study’ – (ibid.) *Aen.*; Aeneas
‘The Golden Bough’ – (ibid.) *Aen.*; Aeneas

Jorie Graham (1950-)

‘Self Portrait as Hurry and Delay’ – *The End of Beauty* (1987) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
‘Ravel and Unravel’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope

- ‘Oblivion Aubade’ – *The Errancy* (1997) *Od.*
 ‘Sea-blue Aubade’ – (ibid.) *Od.*
 ‘Underneath (Calypso)’ – *Swarm* (2000) *Od.*; Calypso

Judy Grahn (1940-)

- ‘Helen, at 9 A.M., at Noon, at 5:15’ – *The Words of a Common Woman* (1978) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Helen in Hollywood’ – *Queen of Wands* (1982) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Helen’s Names’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Helen You Always Were’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Helen Your Beauty’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘Paris and Helen’ – *love belongs to those who do the feeling: New & Selected Poems*
 (1966-2006) (2008) *Il.* 3; Helen, Paris

Linda Gregg (1942-)

- ‘Aphrodite and the Nature of Art’ – *Chosen by the Lion* (1995)
 *Od.* 8.266-366; Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Ares

Horace Gregory (1898-1982)

- ‘A Temptation of Odysseus’ – *The Door in the Desert* (1951)
 *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens, Odysseus
 ‘Homage to Circe’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus
 ‘Haunted Odysseus: The Last Testament’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 11.204-8; Odysseus
 ‘Elegy and Flame’ – *Another Look* (1973) *Il.* 16; Patroclus, Achilles

Allen Grossman (1932-)

- ‘Berlin 1955’ – *A Harlot’s Hire* (1961/2) *Od.*; Penelope
 ‘Creusa’ – (ibid.) *Aen.*; Creusa, Aeneas
 ‘Tales of Odysseus’ – *The Recluse* (1965) *Od.* 4.382-570, 11.121-3; Proteus; Odysseus
 ‘After Repetition’ – *The Woman on the Bridge Over the Chicago River* (1979)
 *Il.* 6.472-3; Hector, Astyanax, Andromache
 ‘Bow Spirit’ – *Of the Great House* (1982) *Od.* 19
 ‘The Life and Death Kisses’ – *The Ether Dome* (1991) *Aen.* 6.268

Thom Gunn (1929-2004)

- ‘Helen’s Rape’ – *Fighting Terms* (1954) *Il.*; Helen
 ‘The Wound’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Achilles
 ‘Moly’ – *Moly* (1971) *Od.* 10; Circe

Marilyn Hacker (1942-)

- ‘Mythology’ – *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986) *Od.*; Penelope

Rachel Hadas (1948-)

- ‘After the Cave’ – *Starting from Troy* (1975) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Creusa, Aeneas, Anna
‘The Fall of Troy’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 1.1; *Aen.* 2; Aeneas, Achilles; Rome
‘That Time, This Place’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2; Priam
‘Teaching the Iliad’ – *Pass It On* (1989) *Il.* proem.; Achilles
‘Philoctetes’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 2; Odysseus
‘The Blind Gates’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 6.893-901
‘Greek Gold’ – *Halfway Down the Hall: New and Selected Poems* (1998)
‘Helen Variations’ – in *Arion*, 1997 *Il.*; *Od.*; Helen, Odysseus, Menelaus

Donald Hall (1928-)

- ‘Laocoon’ – *New Poems by American Poets 2* *Aen.* 2; Laocoon

Michael S. Harper (1938-)

- ‘Odd Facts About the Painter (On Casualty)’ – *Honorable Amendments* (1995) *Od.*; Circe
‘Dear Romie: Rock Formation Epistles’ – *Honorable Amendments* (1995) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Notes on Making: The Heroic Pattern Updated: 1997’ – *Songlines in Michaeltree* (2000)
..... *Od.*; Odysseus

James Harrison (1937-)

- ‘Penelope’ – *Norton Introduction to Poetry* (1991) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Joseph Harrison (1957-)

- ‘The Cretonnes of Penelope’ – in *The Paris Review*, 1996 *Od.*; Penelope, the Suitors

Betsy Hearne (1942-)

- ‘Penelope’ – *Polaroid And Other Poems of View* (1991) *Od.*; Penelope

Anthony Hecht (1923-2004)

- ‘See Naples and Die’ – *The Transparent Man* (1990) *Aen.* 6; V. ref.
‘Death Demure’ – *Flight Among the Tombs* (1997) *Od.*; Odysseus, Sirens
‘Poppy’ – *The Darkness and the Light* (2001) *Il.* 8.303-8; Achilles, Patroclus

Judith Page Heitzman

- ‘After Odysseus’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Emily Hiestand (1947-)

- ‘The Story Should Spin’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Tony Hoagland (1953 -)

‘In the Land of Lotus Eaters’ – *Sweet Ruin* (1993) *Od.* 9.82-104; Odysseus

Daniel Hoffman (1923-2013)

‘Ten Thousand Dreaming Seamen Proven Wrong’ – *Broken Laws* (1970) *Od.*; Sirens

Kevin Holden (-)

‘Bees’ – in *The New Yorker*, 22 September 2014 *Aen.* 6.703-9

Raymond Holden (1894-1972)

‘Circe’ – *Granite and Alabaster* (1922) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

‘Calypso’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus

Richard Howard (1929-)

‘Ithaca: The Palace at 4 AM’ – in *Grand Street*, Summer 1984 *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope

‘Telemachus’ – *Like Most Revelations* (1994) *Od.*; Circe, Telemachus

Victor Howes

‘Paris Puts Down a Rumor’ – in *Classical Outlook*, Winter 1994 *Il.*; Paris, Helen

‘Polyphemus Perverse’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.* 9; Polyphemus

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

‘Prelude to Our Age: A Negro History Poem’ – *Poems, 1951-1960* H. ref.

Rolfe Humphries (1894-1969)

‘Aeolus’ – *Europa and Other Poems and Sonnets* (1928) *Od.*; *Aen.*; Aeolus

‘Episode in Elysium’ – *The New Republic* (15 June 1932) *Aen.* 6

‘Proteus, or, The Shapes of Conscience’ – *Out of the Jewel* (1942) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

‘Arachne, Penelope’ – *Coat on a Stick* (1969) *Od.*; Penelope

Angela Jackson (1951-)

‘Spinster Song’ – *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses: The Beatitudes of the Spinners* (1993)

..... *Od.*; Penelope

Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991)

‘Helen’s Burning’ – *Collected Poems* (1938) *Il.*; Helen

- ‘Helen’s Faces’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen
- Randall Jarrell (1914-1965)**
- ‘When Achilles Fought and Fell’ – uncollected (1937),
in *The Complete Poems* (1981) *Il.*; Achilles
- Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962)**
- ‘The Resurrection of Achilles’ – *4 Poems and a Fragment* (1936) *Il.*; Achilles
‘De Rerum Virtute’ – *Hungerfield* (1954) H. ref.
‘The Epic Stars’ – *The Selected Poems of Robinson Jeffers* (2001) H. ref.
- Judith Johnson (1936-)**
- ‘Body Politic’ – *The Ice Lizard* (1992) *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas; Rome
- Troy Jollimore (1971-)**
- ‘Homer’ – in *Poetry*, February 2014 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
- Laurence Josephs**
- ‘Achilles’ – in *St. John’s Review*, Autumn 1982 *Il.*; Achilles
- Robert Kelly (1935-)**
- ‘The Menelaus’ – *Kill the Messenger Who Brings Bad News* (1979) *Il.*; Menelaus, Helen
- Lysander Kemp (1920-1992)**
- ‘Odysseus’ – *Best Poems of 1957* (1958) *Od.*; Odysseus, Circe
- Etheridge Knight (1931-1991)**
- ‘A Love Poem’ *Od.*; Penelope, Cyclops
- Yusef Komunyakaa (1947-)**
- ‘Surgery’ – *Thieves of Paradise* (1998) *Od.*; Odysseus
- Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006)**
- ‘Off Point Lotus’ – *Selected Poems 1928-1958* *Od.* 9.82-104
‘Proteus’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

Barton Kunstler

- ‘Achilles’ Song’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Il.* 22, 24; Achilles, Hector
‘Paris/Alexandros’ – (ibid.) *Il.* 3; Paris

Richmond Lattimore (1906-1984)

- ‘Notes from the Odyssey’ – in *The Hudson Review*, 1968
..... *Od.*; Elpenor, Circe, Penelope, Odysseus

Muna Lee (1895-1965)

- ‘As Helen Once’ – *The Third Book of Modern Verse* (1927) *Il.*; Helen, Paris

Jeffrey Levine (1949-)

- ‘Dawn, with Cardinals’ – in *Missouri Review*, 1999 *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope
‘One Month Before his 50th Birthday’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Penelope Draws from Life’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
‘It Turns Out Circe Has Something of a Past’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Circe, Odysseus
‘Telemachos in San Miguel’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Telemachus, Odysseus

Janet Lewis (1899-1998)

- ‘Helen Grown Old’ – *Poems, 1924-1944* (1950) *Il.*; Helen, Paris, Menelaus

William Logan (1950-)

- ‘The Death of Elpenor X [551-560]’ – *Homer in English* (1996) *Od.* 10.551-60; Elpenor

Robert Lowell (1917-1977)

- ‘Between the Porch and the Altar’ – *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946) *Aen.* 2
‘The Death of the Sheriff’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2.506
‘First Sunday in Lent’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2
‘Falling Asleep over the Aeneid’ – *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951)
..... *Aen.* 11.22-99; V. ref.; Aeneas, Pallas, Dido
‘The Killing of Lykaon’ – *Imitations* (1961) *Il.* 21; Achilles, Lykaon
‘Helen’ – (ibid.) *Il.*
‘Returning’ – *For the Union Dead* (1964) *Od.*
‘Achilles to the dying Lykaon’ – *History* (1973) *Il.* 21; Achilles, Lykaon
‘Penelope’ – (ibid.) *Od.*
‘Ulysses’ – (ibid.) *Od.*
‘Helen’ – (ibid.) *Il.*
‘Walks’ – (ibid.) *Od.*
‘Ulysses and Circe’ – *Day by Day* (1977) *Od.* 10; Odysseus, Circe, Penelope
‘Homecoming’ – (ibid.) *Od.*

Cynthia Macdonald (1928-)

‘Why Penelope Was Happy’ – *Alternate Means of Transport* (1985) ... *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Archibald Macleish (1892-1982)

‘1933’ – *Poems* (1924-1933) *Od.* 11.60-78; Elpenor, Tiresias, Odysseus

‘Calypso’s Island’ – *Later Poems* (1951-1962) *Od.* 5.215-224; Odysseus, Calypso, Penelope

Charles Martin (1942-)

‘Dido and Aeneas’ – in *Poetry*, 1984 *Aen.* 4; Anna, Dido, Aeneas; Rome, Carthage

Roy Marz

‘The Humor of Helen’ – *The Island-Maker* (1982) *Il.*; Helen, Paris

Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950)

‘The Spooniad’ – *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) *Il.* proem

‘Helen of Troy’ – *Songs and Satires* (1916) *Il.*; Helen, Paris

‘Ulysses’ – *The Open Sea* (1921) *Od.*; Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, Circe, Calypso

William Matthews (1942-1997)

‘Homer's Seeing-Eye Dog’ – *Selected Poems and Translations, 1969-1991* *Od.*; H. ref.

‘Achilles’ – in *Poetry*, 1997 *Il.*; Achilles

Mekeel McBride (1950-)

‘Odysseus and the Sirens’ – *No Ordinary World* (1979) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens, Odysseus

Rebecca McClanahan

‘The Angle of Shadow, The Angle of Light’ – *The Intersection of X and Y* (1996) ... *Il.*; Achilles

Michael McClure (1932-)

‘Changer’ – *Fragments of Perseus* (1978) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

John McKernan (1942-)

‘Certainly Odysseus Wept’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Odysseus

Peter Meinke (1932-)

‘Helen’ – *Liquid Paper: New and Selected Poems* (1991) *Il.*; Helen

William Meredith (1919-2007)

‘Homeric Simile’ – *Ships and Other Figures* (1948) H. ref.

‘Simile’ – *Partial Accounts* (1987) H. ref.

Eve Merriam (1916-1992)

‘Speaking of Marriage’ – *The Double Bed* (1958) *Od.*; Penelope, Circe, Odysseus

James Merrill (1926-1995)

The Changing Light at Sandover (1982) *Od.* 11; *Aen.* 6

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

‘A Song’ – *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946) *Aen.*; Dido, Aeneas; Carthage

‘Calypso’s Island’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 5; Calypso

‘Like Ilium’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2; Aeneas, Anchises; Troy

W. S. Merwin (1927-)

‘The Bones of Palinurus Pray to the North Star’ – *A Mask for Janus* (1952) *Aen.* 5, 6

‘Proteus’ – *The Dancing Bears* (1954) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

‘Dog Dreaming’ – *Green with Beasts* (1956) *Od.* 17.290-323

‘Odysseus’ – *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

‘Lethe’ – in *The New Republic*, 12 September 1928 *Aen.* 6.703-52

‘An Ancient Gesture’ – *Mine the Harvest* (1954) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Gabriella Mirollo

‘Waiting for Odysseus’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Leonard Nathan (1924-2007)

‘Washing Socks’ – *Returning your Call* (1975) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope

‘Family Circle’ – *Dear Blood* (1980) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus

Howard Nemerov (1920-1991)

‘Runes’ – *New Poems* (1960) ... *Od.* 19, 22, 23, 24; Odysseus, Penelope, Eurycleia, Telemachus
‘A Fable of the War’ – *Collected Poems* (1977) *Aen.* 6.703-21

Charles Norman (1910-1996)

‘Telemachus’ – *The Bright World and Other Poems* (1930)
..... *Od.* 1 and 24; Telemachus, Odysseus, Penelope

Charles Olson (1910-1970)

‘There Is No River Which Is Called Lethe’ – *Collected Poems* *Aen.* 6.703-52

Alicia Ostriker (1937 -)

‘Homecoming’ – *A Woman Under the Surface* (1982)
..... *Il.* ref.; *Od.* ref; *H.* ref.; Penelope, Odysseus

James Oppenheim (1882-1932)

‘Nausicaa’ – *The Sea* (1924) *Od.* 6; Nausicaa, Helen, Odysseus

Jay Parini (1948-)

‘In the Sphere of Common Duty’ – *Town Life* (1988) *Od.*; Telemachus, Odysseus; Ithaca

Dorothy Parker (1893-1967)

‘Penelope’ – *Not So Deep as a Well* (1936) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Linda Pastan (1932-)

‘You are Odysseus’ – *Aspects of Eve* (1975) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope
‘The Sirens’ – *Imperfect Paradise* (1988) *Od.*; Sirens, Odysseus, Penelope
‘Rereading the *Odyssey* in Middle Age’ – (ibid.) *Od.* ref.
‘At the Loom’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope
‘Circe’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Circe, Odysseus, Penelope, Nausicaa, Dido
‘The Son’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 1; Telemachus, Odysseus
‘The Suitor’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; the Suitors, Penelope, Odysseus, Telemachus
‘Argos’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 17; Penelope, Eurycleia, Argos
‘Penelope’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
‘We Get What We Wish For at Our Peril’ – *The Last Uncle* (2002)
..... *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope; Ithaca
‘To Penelope’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus; Ithaca
‘Dido’s Farewell’ – in *Gods and Mortals*, 2001 *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas

John Peck (1941-)

['He who called blood builder...'] – *Argura* (1993) *Aen.*; Aeneas

William Alexander Percy (1885-1942)

'Calypso to Ulysses' – *Enzio's Kingdom and Other Poems* (1924) *Od.* 5; Calypso, Odysseus
'Siren Song' – (ibid.) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens

Paul Petrie (1928-2012)

'Penelope's Song' – in *Classical Outlook*, Winter 1998 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Sanford Pinsker (1941-)

'Penelope's Reply (with apologies to Tennyson)' (1979) – *Homer in English* (1996)
..... *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Robert Pinsky (1940-)

An Explanation of America (1979) *Od.*; Odysseus, Cyclopes; Rome, Ithaca

Kenneth Pitchford (1931)

'Odysseus with the Oar' – in *The Kenyon Review*, 1964
..... *Od.* 11.121-3, 22, 24; Odysseus, Elpenor, Ajax

Dorothy Belle Pollack

'Mythical Musings: Nausicaa' – in *Classical Outlook*, Winter 1999 *Od.*; Nausicaa

Katha Pollitt (1949-)

'Penelope Writes' – *Antarctic Traveler* (1983) *Od.*; Penelope

Burt Porter

'A Girl Reading *The Iliad*' – *A Spiral Wind* (2005) *Il.* ref.
'Homer' – (ibid.) H. ref.
'Hector' – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hector
'Prayer' – (ibid.) *Il.* 22; Achilles, Hector
'Penelope' – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope
'Odysseus at 90 Remembers the Princess Nausicaa' – (ibid.) *Od.*; Nausicaa, Odysseus
'Diomedes Speaks of Fame' – (ibid.) *Il.*; Achilles
'Circe' – (ibid.) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus

Frederic Prokosch (1906-1989)

‘Sunburned Ulysses’ – *Death at Sea* (1940) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens, Odysseus
‘Among the Caves’ – 1941, privately printed in Lisbon *Aen.* 4; Dido, Aeneas

Bin Ramke (1947-)

‘After Virgil’ – *Matter* (2004) *Aen.*; V. ref.

Donald Revell (1954-)

‘To Penelope’ – in *Poetry*, October 1986 *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope

Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976)

‘By the Well of Living and Seeing’ – *By The Well of Living and Seeing and the Fifth
Book of the Maccabees* (1969) H. ref.

Adrienne Rich (1929-)

‘Eurycleia’s Tale’ – *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963)
..... *Od.*; Eurycleia, Telemachus, Odysseus, Penelope

William Pitt Root (1941-)

‘Ithaca Refigured’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Odysseus

Kenneth Rosen

‘The Odyssey’ – in *Agni Review*, 1996 *Od.*; Odysseus, Circe

Susan Schultz (1958-)

‘Penelope’s Letter to Ulysses’ – in *The Missouri Review*, 1990 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966)

‘To Helen’ – *Last and Lost Poems* (1979) *Il.*; Helen

Richard Selig (1929-1957)

‘The Island: November 1953’ – *Poems* (1962) *Od.* 10; Circe, Odysseus
‘On the Verge of Summer’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Thetis, Achilles

Alan Shapiro (1952-)

- ‘Virgil’s Descent’ – in *Poetry*, 1989 *Aen.* 6; V. ref.
‘Calypso, Penelope’ – in *Agni Review*, 1996 *Od.* 5 and 23; Odysseus, Calypso, Penelope
‘Lethe’ – *Mixed Company* (1996) *Aen.* 6.703-21; V. ref.; Aeneas
‘Hecuba’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Hecuba
‘On Men Weeping’ – *A Store of Joys* (1997) *Il.*; Achilles
‘Aphrodite’ – *The Dead Alive and Busy* (2000) Aphrodite, Anchises
‘The Bath’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2; Aeneas, Anchises
‘Hermes’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 24
‘Furies’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 7
‘Homeric Turns’ – in *At Length*, 2010
..... *Il.* 1.590ff., 3, 18, ; Hera, Hephaestus, Helen, Thetis, Achilles, Patroclus

Reginald Shepherd (1963-2008)

- ‘Odysseus Becalmed’ – *Angel, Interrupted* (1996) *Od.*; Odysseus, Sirens

Charles Simic (1938-)

- ‘My Weariness of Epic Proportions’ – *Austerities* (1982) *Il.*; Achilles, Patroclus, Hector

Louis Simpson (1923-2012)

- ‘Ulysses and the Sirens’ – *Good News of Death* (1955) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens, Odysseus
‘The Return’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Aegean’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Helen

Myra Sklarew (1934-)

- ‘Infinite Regress of War’ – *Harmless* (2010) *Od.*; Penelope

W.D. Snodgrass (1926–2009)

- ‘Noman...No man’ – *Heart’s Needle* (1959) *Od.* 9; Polyphemus, Odysseus

Kathleen Spivack (1938-)

- ‘Mythmaking’ – in *Poetry*, December 1966 *Il.*; Helen, Menelaus, Paris
‘Dido: Swarming’ – *Poetry Anthology 1912-1977* *Aen.* 4; Dido

Maura Stanton (1946-)

- ‘A Voice for the Sirens’ – *Snow on Snow* (1975) *Od.* 12.184-91; Sirens
‘Proteus’s Tale’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus
‘Autumn in the Land of the Lotus Eaters’ – *Cries of Swimmers* (1984) *Od.* 9.82-104
‘Readings Fitzgerald’s Iliad’ – (ibid.) *Il.* ref.

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

- ‘New England Verses’ – *Harmonium* (1931) *Il.* ref.
‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction – *Transport to Summer* (1947) *V.* ref.
‘The World as Meditation’ – *The Rock* (1954) *Od.*; Odysseus, Penelope
‘The Sail of Odysseus’ – *Late Poems* (1950-1955) *Od.*; Odysseus
‘Presence of an External Master of Knowledge’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Odysseus

Allen Tate (1899-1979)

- ‘Ode to the Confederate Dead’ – *Three Poems* (1930) *Il.* 6.146
‘The Mediterranean’ – *The Mediterranean and Other Poems* (1936) *Il.* 1.241
‘Aeneas at Washington’ – (ibid)
..... *Aen.* 2 and 4.460-3; Aeneas, Anchises, Neoptolemus, Hecuba, Priam; Troy
‘Aeneas at New York’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 2; Laocoon, Sinon, Aeneas, Hector; Troy

Zona Teti

- ‘From Nestor to Helen Now of Troy’ – in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 1990
..... *Il.*; Nestor, Helen
‘Ulysses on the Way Back from Troy’ – in *Ploughshares*, Spring 2003 *Od.*; Odysseus

Eve Triem (1902-1992)

- ‘The Witness’ – *New as a Wave: A Retrospective* (1984) *H.* ref.

Carol Tufts

- ‘Paris and Helen’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Il.*; Paris, Helen

Mark Van Doren (1894-1972)

- ‘Tiresias’ – *Now the Sky and Other Poems* (1928) *Od.* 11; Tiresias, Odysseus
‘Odysseus’ – *New Poems* (1948) *Od.* 11.121-3; Odysseus
‘Achilles’ – (ibid.) *Il.*; Achilles, Hector, Thetis, Priam
‘To Homer’ – (ibid.) *Od.* 11.121-3; *H.* ref.
‘Hector Dead’ – *Spring Birth* (1953) *Il.* 22; Hector, Andromache
‘There Was an Island’ – *Spring Birth* (1953) *Od.*; Odysseus; Ithaca
‘Proteus’ – *Collected and New Poems* (1963) *Od.* 4.382-570; Proteus

Peter Viereck (1916-2006)

- ‘Penelope’s Loom’ – *Terror and Decorum* (1948) *Od.*; Penelope
‘Kilroy’ – (ibid.) *Od.*; Penelope

Bella (Zweig) Vivante (1946-)

- ‘Paeon to Helen’ – in *Woman/Spirit*, Summer 1981 *Il.*; Helen

Diane Wakoski (1937-)

‘Daughter Moon’ – *Waiting for the King of Spain* (1980) *Od.*; Penelope

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989)

‘Fatal Interview: Penthesilea and Achilles’ – in *The Kenyon Review*, 1958
..... *Il.*; *Aen.* 1.490-3; Achilles

Rosanna Warren (1953-)

‘The Twelfth Day’ – *Stained Glass* (1993) *Il.* 22 and 24; Achilles, Hector, Thetis
‘Arrival’ – *Departure* (2003) *Il.* 13; Poseidon
‘Poetry Reading’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 6.883, 893-901; Aeneas; Rome
‘Simile’ – (ibid.) H./V. ref.
‘Turnus’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 12
‘Bonfires’ – (ibid.) *Aen.* 11
‘Odyssey’ – in *The American Poetry Review*, 2006 *Od.*; Penelope, Laertes

Ioanna-Veronika Warwick

‘Archaic Penelope’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus
‘Penelope and Odysseus as One Person’ – in *Alaska Quarterly* *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Theodore Weiss (1916-2003)

‘The Storeroom’ – *Fireweeds* (1976) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Robert F. Whisler

‘Penelope and Me’ – *Anthology of American Verse* (1984) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Karen Whitehill (1947-)

‘Penelope’ – *New Poets, Women. An Anthology* (1976) *Od.*; Penelope

Richard Wilbur (1921-)

‘The Sirens’ – *Ceremony and Other Poems* *Od.*; Sirens
‘Helen’ – *Collected Poems 1943-2004* *Il.*; Helen

Eleanor Wilner (1937-)

‘The World is Not a Meditation’ – *Shekinnah* (1984) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Elinor Wylie (1885-1928)

‘Penelope’ – Beinecke Library, Yale University (unpublished) *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

Ellen Roberts Young

‘Her Story’ – in *Orpheus & company*, 1999 *Od.*; Penelope

Joy Yourcenar

‘Penelope’ – in *Maine Review*, 1994 *Od.*; Penelope, Odysseus

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