

A Guide to Ancient Greek Literature, Language, Script, Imagination and Philosophy

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By

Frederic Will

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*Save for the wild force of nature, nothing moves in this world
that is not Greek in origin.*
—Lord Acton

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DESCRIPTION

This book is a chronological survey of the major writers (or reciters, or performers, or orators) of Ancient Greece.

In Part One I explore the major genres of ancient Greek literature: epic, history, drama, satire, lyric, and philosophy. I will profile some of the key issues and authors of each period, characterize the literature of each period, and sprinkle quotes through the whole. The book is meant to be useful for the student of classics, the person drawn to the issues emerging from trying to understand antiquity, and the literary critic interested in the perennial issues of aesthetics.

If there is a cachet to the whole, it is that I am trying to speak from and to you, as an individual reader, to run runs of reflection (even meditation)—to cut you into a dialogue and to help you see where you stand; there are both occasional discussion questions (which I have called ‘thought questions’) to awaken dialogue with you, and bibliographical suggestions are offered where appropriate to enable you to continue the inquiry. In other words, the first part of this text can serve both as a reference guide and as a kind of thought guide, a *Blue Guide* to the Hellenic intellect, written for educated but still curious travelers, who are part both of the great human heritage—greater mankind—and of our own particular moment in it.

Part Two comprises fifteen short essays on aspects of ancient Greek culture: language (script and dialects); folklore; music; dance; mythology; painting; theater; government; military structures; class structure; gender relations; innovations; trade; science. These are all areas which have passed our lens, in the earlier chronological author profiles. Once again, the entries will be followed by thought questions—as though you guys were students, yes—and suggestions for further reading. A rich index will facilitate a search of the items which comprise the cultural entries; the author will do his best, as we proceed, to cross-reference the cultural with the ‘literary’ entries of the first part of the Guide. The final product, ideally, will serve as both reference guide and launchpad for ongoing attentions to our Hellenic heritage.

About the Author

This reference guide was developed by Frederic Will, President of the Humanities Institute (*humanitiesinstitute.org*). The author of over sixty books, Will has written extensively on Greco-Roman cultures. He was the co-founder, with William Arrowsmith, of the groundbreaking Classical journal *Arion* (1961–65), which in its time, at the University of Texas, was instrumental in waking the study of Classics from its mid-twentieth-century slumber and returning it to the life of America.

PART ONE

LITERARY PROFILES

PERIOD ONE: THE HEROIC AGE (1500–750 BC)

Epics

Topic 1. Early Epic Poetry

Background. The Greek epic launches around the genius of Homer, the UR-poet for the Greeks, for the point of reference in law, philosophy, political wisdom until our own day, and without argument until at least the end of the fourth century BC. We are still not certain of the identity of this creator, or when his originally oral creation was consigned to writing, but we know both that the war he memorialized in the *Iliad* took place around the thirteenth century BC, and that the oral works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were written down in Athens.

This version is sometimes referred to as the Peisistratid recension, for it was completed during the reign of either the politician Peisistratus (608–527 BC) or of his son Hipparchus. We also know that consigning a great oral text to writing does something decisive to that text. It memorializes it, giving it a location in space and time, and to some extent freezes it, while at the same time raising innumerable questions about that text, about whether it says this or that in this or that place. The creative history of Homer's work doubtless required centuries of oral accretion; writing it down made it an 'object,' though an object concerning which fresh new literary questions immediately arose, such as how to define the 'Homeric line,' how to grasp the interrelation of the two epics, and how to relate Homer's message to the changing generations that were to read him, right up to our moment.

Antecedents. Behind the Greek epic tradition there was a mighty volume of Ancient Near Eastern epic texts, many of them lost in the sands of the Middle East, which included such masterworks as the Babylonian Creation Story (*Enuma Elish*) or *Gilgamesh* (late second millennium BC), literary exploration of fundamental human themes—immortality, lust, personal integrity—composed hundreds of years before Homer's work. That Mesopotamian background was clearly empowering to the epic imagination which grew into Homer from the various culture-creative people who occupied the Ancient Near East. Themes of heroic dignity, defiance of

death, the challenge of self-sacrifice, even domestic gentleness had all caught the deepest possible attention from Egyptians, Hebrews, Sumerians, and Hellenes.

The Peisistratid Recension. Language development was another factor in making the Greek epic imagination effective. The great ancient Greek epics were originally empowered by both nascent writing systems and massive earlier feats of oral memory. By the time of the Peisistratid recension, putting these texts together in the late seventh century, an elegant and efficient alphabetic system, which Greek was, was in place and had been found invaluable for communication, and memorization. The development of that matured code system, out of an ancient history leading through cuneiform and hieroglyphic traditions, eventually into a Phoenician waystage, required millennia of chirographic experiments and private ingenuities. Even a native genius like Homer was dependent on the tireless creative efforts of his language-and-script making predecessors, as he is today dependent on our imaginative and expressive needs to reach back into the greatness which has made us what we are.

Worth Probing. The Peisistratid recension looks like an important piece of historical detail. What do we know, and what can we find out, about that moment of putting Homer to papyrus? Was it a moment or was it a stage in a long and growing practice, in which oral and written versions of the poem long co-existed? The culmination of a gradual tradition?

What can we say about the Near Eastern origins of Homeric epic? Is it coincidence that the *ignis fatuus* of immortality burns brightly both in *Gilgamesh* (third millennium B.C.) and in the *Iliad*—are both Achilles and Gilgamesh haunted by their relation to death? Can we imagine a more provocative theology than that of Gilgamesh himself, to whose heroism death would not yield, or that of Achilles, whose divine origins seemed only to intensify his determination to an early death?

Topic 2. Homer (c. Twelfth–eighth centuries BC)

Backdrop. We will open with the story of the *Iliad*, the epic about the Fall of Troy, arguably the greater (and earlier) of Homer's two works. The historic 'Fall'—traditionally dated by the Greeks to the twelfth century BC—brought together a set of powerful local Greek lords and retainers, whose interest was in the wealth and shipping control of the walled city of Troy, strategically located on the shores of the Bosphorus. The 'literary myths' within Homer's work intertwine with the historical events Homer's texts depict. Are we dealing with history or imagination? Has our need to

reify Homer's material run away with us, so that we attribute more materiality than there actually was, to the background of his work?

Myth. A myth, which underpins Homer's account of the Greek commercial/military venture to Troy, holds that Alexander, the son of the King of Troy, stole Helen, the glamorous wife of the Greek warlord Menelaus, and carried her off to Troy as his love-toy; the myth also includes hints that Helen approved the operation. The story of the subsequent Greek expedition against Troy, and the defeat of the city and its rulers, would by this myth be a byproduct of commercial adventure; only by Homer's vision transmuted into a powerful story of action, military courage and brutality, sexual passion, and ultimately regions of self-sacrifice and awareness that still challenge the lives of all of us. Myth's hunger to explain knows no limits.

Levels of Meaning. The *Iliad* can be read as pure absorbing fiction in dactylic hexameters, or as an account of the historical movement of Mediterranean peoples in the mid-second millennium, an account referring back to an event six to eight hundred years earlier than Homer's own time, or, finally—and this is what keeps the tale alive—simply as a story of military adventure, moody and desperate leaders, brutal enemies, and on a rare occasion a challenge—like that to Achilles at the end—to go beyond the self into an act of grace. At this extremity, the poem verges on issues of theology. The greatness of the epic depends on the energy with which its meaning is generated on every level. Needless to say, even a brief immersion in the language of ancient Greece will yield tremendous benefits for getting the feel of Homer.

Metrics: The Dactylic Hexameter. We have spoken about the maturing of the Greek language, until it reached a kind of flexibility and richness highly favorable to saying what the Greeks had on their minds by the fifth century BC. (The Archaic Age, on this account, would have served as maturing ground for a language which the new politically egalitarian society set out to perfect for debate and discussion.) It would be simplistic, though, to downplay the wonders of pre-fifth-century Greek, and particularly the language for poetry made available by the epic line, the dactylic hexameter. The unique importance of this metrical line, in carrying and shaping the entire epic tradition right through to Roman literature merits special attention here. We can trace the hexameter wherever the epic appears in Greece, all the way to Apollonius Rhodius in the late third century. In English our closest parallel is the iambic pentameter, which, like the hexameter, seems to belong to the breath and thought of a whole people, as it develops.

Line Structure. The dactylic hexameter is a long epic line, typically broken into two parts, which served as the vehicle of Homer's creation, as well as of subsequent Greek epics. The hexameter is a line of six *cola* (metrical units), of which the basic foot is long/short/short, where length refers to length of time required to produce the syllable in question. We are to imagine the epic typically performed to the strumming of the lyre, and by a highly experienced mobile professional, who measured his success by the muscular acclaim of his all-male upper-class warrior audiences. The blend of lengthy line with recurrent metric cola combines tension with exposition, the formula for long term hearing.

The Odyssey: The True Story. Among the Greek warriors at Troy were many leaders who felt themselves aggrieved by the 'rape of Helen,' or the 'rape of their commercial vigor,' however the loss is interpreted. Among these independent warriors was Odysseus, 'lord of the manor' on the island of Ithaca. As a supporter of Agamemnon, the overall head of the Greek expedition, Odysseus was a team player until Troy fell, but after the Fall—once again the date traditionally given by the Greeks to the event was the twelfth century BC, the Bronze Age—the Greek warriors dispersed, heading back to their homeland and local communities. Odysseus, the name of a cultural hero and a model for many of the virtues the Greeks treasured—quickness of thought, wit, resourcefulness—was among this flock.

Odysseus' Return. In the accounts of this return Homer collects memories lodged deep in the Greek folk memory, recollections of periods of naval adventure, seafaring trade, and commercial rivalry; Homer blends these memories into a coherent whole around the half-'real', half-fictive adventures of a warrior whose courage, sense of irony, and passionate life-love have made him for subsequent world culture a brilliant repository of cultural meanings. You will see, as you follow the narrative of the *Odyssey*, that Homer exposes this fictive personage—whose name Odysseus means 'the angry, even hated, one'—to trials which bring out his character, and with it the salient value traits of the Bronze Age Greek world. Odysseus is no boy scout, but he *is* a family man.

Survivor. Without spoiling the text by retelling stories here, we may draw your attention to a kind of dimension, prevalent in the *Odyssey*—also in the *Iliad*—which is behind the universal greatness of this text. Odysseus is at one point a guest in the kingdom of the Phaeacians, whose idyllic culture is given to dance and music and the gentle life; he has just survived a harrowing battle with the waves at sea. Seated next to the King, at a vast

board of victuals, Odysseus is delighted to hear the bard—for there was always musical entertainment at grandee feasts—recount the details of a hero's wandering, a hero who turns out, as the song proceeds, to be Odysseus himself. (No one except Odysseus has any knowledge of this coincidence.) It is Homer talking to us, no? 'He' does that. A sharp blister of gold, right there in the vast tradition of the epic.

Dimensionality. We as readers/hearers of the epic thrill to the dimensionality of the text, where Homer winks at us across the character of Odysseus, who is winking at us across the irony of listening in delighted silence to a validating tale of himself at sea, a tale which rescues the hero from all the anonymity of endurance on the fishy brine. This kind of sophisticated dimensionality is one mark of a distinctive Hellenic subtlety: Agamemnon quarrels with Achilles, at the outset of the *Iliad*, and we see/hear Homer telling us, over Agamemnon's head, how destructively this hero falls below the response level required by his time and situation. Oedipus demands his people find the killer whose crime has brought plague onto the city—and *he* is the killer; Solon, in a sixth-century lyric, condemns Solon for his weakness and inability to govern the city, and pulls it off with a dry whimsy that might fit into Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Thought Questions. I call the following kinds of things *thought questions*. They spring from a career of hanging around the Greeks, and around university profs, who are forever trying to 'get your attention.' These smidgeons are meant to provoke—I know you, reader, are not a kid—and I want you not to consider yourself more a student than the guy who is putting these questions before you.

What evidence do you see that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed by a single person? Are the styles of the two poems similar? Are the 'morals' of the two poems comparable? Does each poem have its way of leading you to personal greatness?

Do you feel that the *Iliad* was created by a younger person than the *Odyssey*, or perhaps by a different person than the *Odyssey*?

Is there a universality to the leading characters of the two epics? If so, whom do they resemble in other great works of literature? Do you feel on the line personally, in your reading of either of the epics? Are you Odysseus or Achilles? Can you relate to the *mano-a-mano* combat scenes of the *Iliad*? To the raging furies of Diomedes? Are Achilles and Patroclus lovers? What role does the vicarious play in Patroclus' representation of Achilles?

Take a look at a little-played-with French classic, Jean Giono's *La Naissance de l'Odyssee* (*The Birth of the Odyssey*), from 1930. In this novel,

a little guy with a wonderful gift for story telling makes his way home from the Trojan War, across the Peloponnesus toward Ithaca. (His name is Odysseus.) As he progresses, over mountains and through valleys, he earns his evening keep by telling a set of tales about the war. These tales, which are essentially Homer's tales, precede him—oral poetry rushes ahead in its culture—and by the time he gets to his next night's stop, tales essentially glorifying him, Odysseus, have already been told there, and he is appropriately feared. By the time he reaches Ithaca, he is met by terrified suitors, who decamp at once. The epic has been written!

The following are a few great books on Homer's work—a special recommendation. Scholarship and commentary are part of what they comment on. What they comment on is what makes them—this book is on the thing they comment on.

Simone Weil, 'The Iliad, or the Poem of Force' (1939). Twenty-four-page essay. Homer would own it.

Rachel Bessaloff, *On the Iliad* (1947). Ditto, though only slight less strong. No one takes that last chance as fully as Simone Weil.

M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (1954). This book opens up the 'real things' in Homer's fictive universe. If you read anything as a preface to Homer, this might be it. After Finley, the next reread of Homer will be HOMER.

These three books will help Homer to scrutinize you!

Topic 3. The Epic Cycle

The epic cycle is a collection of early Greek epic works (*Cypria*, *Aethiopis*, *Little Iliad*, *Ilioupersis*, *Nostoi*, and *Telegony*, including the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer), which intersect with the mythical material Homer puts to use. Our evidence for such a cycle comes almost entirely from later Greek literature or comment; none of it dates from prior to Hellenistic times. Much of the evidence comes from such distant sources as the mediaeval Greek *Suda*, a tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia of the ancient Mediterranean world. The cycle consisted of fragments of other epics composed contemporaneously with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and like them it circulated throughout the Mediterranean culture zone. In and out of them move many of the figures and legends we associate with the whole body of Greek myths. Is there material here of the quality of Homer's own work?

The Trojan War. The epic tradition centered around the Trojan War, for that immense struggle and Greek victory loomed large in the minds of the Greeks of the post-epic period. (The Greeks were, by the fifth century, fighting their own wars for survival against the Persians, and knew what the Homeric poems were talking about, with their tales of military fights for survival. They knew in what desperate straits the Homeric Greeks had once found themselves, backed up on the shore, confronting the Trojan army). The Trojan War experience still speaks to our imaginations today, on the big screen—*Helen of Troy*, 1966—and in such potent literature as Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey, a Modern Sequel*, 1938. In a sense, then, the epic cycle continues to unfold around us. The Trojan War is still being fought!

Bards. The performers of that Great War epic cycle tradition were, we assume on good but slim evidence, professional singers who learned the poems by heart—though doubtless playing with details as memory or current situation indicated—and recited them through the hexameters to musical accompaniment in the presence of warriors and local chiefs. The man on the street, of course, while not present at such grand performances for power society, was deeply imbued with the vast world of historical tale—which formed after all not only the entertainment base for his personal pleasure, but compendia of mythology which linked into his fundamental beliefs. Homer is careful to depict the bardic tradition in his own accounts—say those of the Phaeacian court (*Odyssey*, Book 8); most sharp-edgedly when he puts on stage the bard Demodocus who is recounting tales of the Fall of Troy, which is just what 'Homer' is at that moment doing. We are back to the 'Homeric wink.'

Tales. The tales of the epic cycle were essentially texts of 'religious' belief, in a culture where myth joined entertainment to the religious impulse. Thus it is no surprise that there should have been more tales than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to carry on the great tradition; and in fact the epic cycle, the *epikos kyklos*, seems to have been just that, expressive pieces of epic material that thrived adjacent to the material of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and that comprised part of the whole corpus of the epic tradition. Could we say that the conflicts within early Christianity, over which Biblical texts to allow into the canon, bore some resemblance to the vying for centrality, among the candidates for central position in the Hellenic tradition?

Fragments. Pieces, in fact, are just what the epic cycle now is for us. What remains to us are eight fragments of epics—taken off battered papyri, for the most part—which deal with episodes interwoven with the tales Homer recounts: events which provoked the war, rapes and victimizations within

the war; details of the actual destruction of Troy; all apparently supplementing Homer's tales without overlapping them. The date of the creation/construction/writing of this oral material is usually taken to be slightly later than that of the Peisistratid recension, and the poetic creators of these cycle epics are customarily viewed by the ancient critics as *neoterói*, later than (and probably *inferior to*) Homer.

Ignorance. That our knowledge of these works is as slight as this entry suggests, results from our dependence, for the little we know, on such references as that made in the Preface to the *Iliad* edited in Venice in the tenth century AD. You see how far we must reach to find reverberations of the epic cycle tradition? The very *compilation* of this relatively little-known set of texts probably dates to the first century BC—further evidence of how little we can truly claim to know about this work. On the positive side, though, can't we say that all later commentaries, whether scholarship or creative negotiation, are a working in the channel originally dug by the imagination in the Homeric world?

A Thought. The body of literature, as it was formed in pre-modern times, is a badly torn cloak, with many parts of the fabric washed away. Can an oral tradition—in which the course of time melds into various versions of a writing tradition—ever be reconstructed? Or does it build itself up from inside organically, in a way which makes it impossible to penetrate from the 'outward' critical stance of the reconstructive historian? Another question of the type: can the past be known as that within-itself-thing it is in occurring? Does the oral literary tradition, when and how we find it, evoke our primal condition of standing inside and working with history, while the advent of writing places ourselves on the far side of ourselves as history?

Topic 4. The Homeric Hymns (Seventh century BC)

Thirty-Three Hymns. This collection of thirty-three anonymous 'hymns' warranted mention by the historian Thucydides (460–400 BC), but apart from that seems to have been of no interest to the developing body of Classical Greek literature. That despite the fact that—admittedly the dating system requires guesswork—the earliest of these hymn texts were probably written down near the time of the Peisistratid recension, which involved the first 'fixing on papyrus' of the Homeric epics themselves. (The very end of the seventh century BC seems a feasible date for the creation of the earliest of the hymns, the latest of which may have been created as late as the fifth century BC.) They are beautiful works—especially rich openings into the mythological imagination—but fragmentary and subject to constant

interpretation.

The most ambitious of these hymns—which we have to imagine as parts of formal religious or athletic ceremonies—retell some of the great tales embedded in Greek mythology; each hymn devoted to one of the Olympian gods. (Myth, religion, and art interweave again in this work.) In one of the major hymns, to Demeter, the ‘bard’ is tasked to unfold the ancient tale of Demeter and the rape of her daughter, Persephone. (The tale was powerful to the Greeks because, as you know, it embodied the drama of the return of the flowers and crops during the six months of the year when Persephone was freed from her underworld rapist, Hades, and given freedom to be her creative self on earth. There was still enough pre-cultural agricultural memory, among the mainland Greeks, to stir to the sounds of these primal myths.) In the following excerpt from one hymn, the Son of Hyperion, Apollo, consults with Demeter about the ‘loss’ of her daughter:

So said she. And the Son of Hyperion (Apollo) answered her:
‘Queen Demeter, daughter of rich-haired Rhea, I will tell you the truth; for I greatly reverence and pity you in your grief for your trim-ankled daughter. None other of the deathless gods is to blame, but only cloud-gathering Zeus who gave her to Hades, her father’s brother, to be called his buxom wife. And Hades seized her and took her loudly crying in his chariot down to his realm of mist and gloom. Yet, goddess, cease your loud lament and keep not vain anger unrelentingly: Aidoneus, the Ruler of Many, is no unfitting husband among the deathless gods for your child, being your own brother and born of the same stock: also, for honour, he has that third share which he received when division was made at the first, and is appointed lord of those among whom he dwells.

Homeric Hymn to Demeter, trans. Hugh Evelyn-White

Thought Question. What kind of imagination does a fixed tale like the Demeter-Hades piece permit? Is the hymn basically a social statement? Is it the kind of creation we would know how to expect from a budding poet of our day? Is it a guild-learned kind of statement? What kind of translation skill would be required to open out the full beauty of this song?

Topic 5. Hesiod (Seventh century BC, Euboea)

Culture: The Epic Poet as Muse Possessed. The *Iliad* opens with ‘*menin aeide thea...*’ (‘sing to me, goddess, of the wrath of...’) while the *Odyssey* opens with ‘*andra moi ennepe, Mousa...*’ (‘of that man sing to me, O

muse....’). But those initiatory formulas are not the only initiatory pattern available to the Greek epic poet, though they are a pattern reminiscent of a culture in which individualism is sharply subordinated to the codes of the whole society. Goddess and Muse are equally spokespeople for the expression-freeing principle of ancient Greek culture.

Muses. The epic poet Hesiod (seventh century BC), creating in the same formulaic hexameter as Homer, speaks to us as an *individual* voice with no pretensions (like Homer) to channeling inspiration through the goddess principle. It is not that Hesiod has no higher pretensions, for in fact he believes the Muses have given him the power to ‘sing the story of things, the future and the past,’ but he is quite clear that he it is, a Boeotian herdsman and narrator from a wretched farmland near the village of Ascra, who *has been given his power by the Muses*. The Muses do not sing through Hesiod, but empower *him* to sing. *Me, Hesiod.*

The Importance of Hesiod’s Epics. What remains to us from that empowerment is two small epics, the *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*. The *Theogony* describes the origins of the universe out of chaos, the gradual power takeover by the Olympian gods, the struggles that pit Uranus against Cronos and fitfully ushered in the current interrelated pantheon of the Olympian gods. As you read this poem, which may seem arid in the way many of us today find the genealogical lineages in the first books of the Old Testament, you may want to reflect on the fruitfulness of this work for the growth of the first Greek philosophy, which will employ, in its search for a first principle (*arche*), the same kind of research-thinking that generates Hesiod’s *arche* of Chaos, his first principle, from which all else grew. But that fruitfulness is not the only cultural onflow of Hesiod’s work. Order and sequence bear fruit, like the planting rituals that show the way to the annual harvest of Iowa corn. You perform, you reperform, you continue to reform, because the product always seems to be ‘knee high by the fourth of July.’

Decline. Hesiod packs into this epic not only a mythography of the lineage of the gods, but he thereby enriches his argument, that reason and justice on the whole, in the end, prevail: he provides us with a counter vision to the progressive decline of the state of mankind from an original Golden State to the condition of Bronze in which humanity currently finds itself. (This was the prevailing Greek self-image.) The counter juxtaposition of hope with despair, progress with decline, pertinently fires the philosophically scratchy nub of Hesiod’s presence for us.

The Setting of the Epic: The Historical Context of the Works and Days. Hesiod's *Works and Days* narrates out from his grudge against a brother who has dealt inequitably with him, and from there the small epic poem continues to discuss issues for the agricultural householder of the time: when to plant, when to plow, how to use the knowledge of the stars for sea travel, how to bend to the unavoidable dictates of fate, how to use the law. As these issues are discussed we are regularly reminded that the poem as a whole is an object lesson for brother Perses, who has defrauded Hesiod, and who has much to learn from hearing the following epic—which accounts for the importance of thrift, honesty, and hard work. The tenor of this poem is that of a Yankee farmer writing in formal hexameter lines, bowing his head—as do all farmers—to the fate the environment provides them, and writing with sustained fealty to the plans of the gods.

Plebeian. We can hardly imagine a perspective less Homeric, less regally formulated, or as clearly directed to the little guy who invokes it. The binding perspective is captured in two sets of tales which seem to speak from Hesiod's heart. One is the tale that includes Prometheus and Pandora, and fixes on the fate of idle curiosity, as well as on the fate of defying the Gods. *Don't go there, man*, says Hesiod. *Don't abuse the gift of curiosity.* Then there is the thematic of the Five Ages, the tale of the gradual degeneration from gold to iron, which symbolizes the broken world Hesiod belongs to. The hexameter is the only force that binds Homer to Hesiod, part of a distinctive genre for seeing the world; but for Hesiod that meter has uses that are all his own.

Kings. In the following, a hawk, about to consume a small bird, expresses his view of the role of kingship versus the little guy in Hesiod's society.

You fool, why do you scream? Someone much your better has
you.

You go wherever I conduct you, songstress though you may be.

I shall make you my dinner, if I wish, or let you go.

Senseless is he who wishes to set himself against his betters:
he lacks victory and suffers grief upon grief.

Works and Days ll. 207–211, trans. Hugh Evelyn-White

Thought Question. In Homer, kings (chieftains, rather?) are omnipresent, from Agamemnon to Hector and Priam. Are kings dominant figures in the poems in which they appear as important figures? (In the end none of the

three chieftains cited is an action-mover.) Or is the real power with figures like Achilles and Odysseus, not kings but power-figures imbued with the sense of their rulership potential? Does Hesiod appear to harbor similar reservations about the power-sources in his society?

PERIOD TWO: THE ARCHAIC AGE (750–500 BC)

LYRIC AND ODE

Topic 6. The Lyric Imagination and its Historical Setting

Archaic. In the present section we move to the so-called Archaic stage of Greek culture, when the establishment of Homeric poetry both voiced and in writing was already a fact, and the spread of literacy, writing—and accordingly, individualism—was starting to make itself felt. Individualism and plain speech already illuminated the text of Hesiod. We have been there. We now move into a place where the economic and social structures of the fifth century BC polis were being anticipated, though they were still well on the horizon. Socio-politically speaking, we have long left behind the feudal world of high epic, even the rural world of Hesiodic epic, and are in a world of oligarchs; under them spreads the reasonably egalitarian world managed by such ‘sensible men’ as Cleisthenes and Solon. We are not yet in democratic territory, but we are beginning to sense the advent of *that* change. We are in a world where currency, voting, municipal construction, and trade are all shaping the textures of daily life.

Transitions. The transition from Archaic to the fifth-century polis was momentous, as had been the transition from the epic to the pre-polis oligarchical stage of the seventh century. The language we are using to describe this situation is of course too slick and lacking in finesse. It is textbook language, and it is written like all banal scholarship, from the *outside* of history. Think of what is involved, in confessing the truth of this time-perspective. Think of what is involved in a culture you yourself live, when every ‘stage’ gives way to new stage. You don’t know it at the time or what is happening. You are born in America in 1928; Depression and Roosevelt are the time markers you will learn to incorporate into your language and thought, as you tell others where you have come from; you will be talking about these landmarks as definers of your life; 1960 will name you into the Cold War, soon followed by Woodstock and Martin Luther King; 2001 will put the code 9/11 around your neck, and before long globalization, Internet culture, and terrorism will be signature terms to

evoke your world—and the you that is living it. What are the articulations among the joints of this historical skeleton which is forming itself inside you, naming itself by the metaphors of the ‘events of your time’?

It Just Happens? Like, it just happens, man? Is it like that? Or is it that you look back, at a certain time, and you see that a rough pattern has formed? And you say, that was me and this is what me and my team are called today? Noteworthy in ancient Greece is the speed with which these transitions succeeded each other—transitions which, say in the passage from stage to stage, from Solon and Cleisthenes in the later seventh century to Peisistratus in the early sixth, are clear and trackable, and would, if you had been there, have seen you getting used to developing actions like handling real coinage, fitting yourself out with citizen armor, as part of doing your householder National Guard duty, and taking the rituals of voting in stride, so that you had a lot invested in determining who was going to organize your life for you.

Lyrics. Archilochus (seventh century BC) and Sappho (late seventh–middle sixth century BC) are among our guides into this kind of premodern transitional world, and into the world of *lyric expression*, which is the surest landmark of social and cultural change. But there will be many more poets to guide us into this ‘modernist’ period, for in fact we are stepping into a uniquely fertile era for Hellenic self-expression. (Note the number of individuals who spring to our attention in our initial Table of Contents, as we reach the Archaic period. We are, ‘suddenly’—let’s say between 650–575 BC—face-to-face with distinctive and passionate *individuals*, and though they are addressing us in meters as formalized as those of the epic hexameter, these individuals are not channeled by the Muse, even in the brilliant way Homer is, but are in some regards clearly exposed to us in their own individuality, a tone change comparable to the shift in invocation styles we encounter in passing from Homer to Hesiod. In our time, think of the way Emily Dickinson is exposed to us, telling us from inside a carapace of strictures what language her unique soul speaks.

New Voices. These new Greek voices are not coordinated with one another—they do not form schools or community cult groups, nor are they distinctive to a particular locale. Their origins are scattered, from Asia Minor to the islands to different points on the Greek mainland, and they are not preoccupied with any consistent themes—love, warfare, governance, military, folk philosophy, you name it. What they have in common, to repeat, is a desire to express their individual selves, and not, say, the enshrined traditional voices that feed the epic mind.

Sounds. The present point is complex, and unfolds into one of the mysteries of the Hellenic achievement, a cultural adeptness for revealing in lyric the self perfectly formed to its expressive casing. Archilochus, for instance, tells us about his love for Neoboule, his casting away a spear in battle, the experience of an eclipse. We incline to take these professions at face value, and in some cases—like that of the eclipse—it seems plausible to stick with face value. It really happened. But, as the French poet Mallarmé was to say, two and a half millennia later, ‘a poem is made of words’ and the poet’s first responsibility is to words, the way they fit together, their sounds—to *those* kinds of honesty. We must be on guard, when we draw conclusions about matters of fact from verbal artifacts, especially from those composed ‘long ago.’ The temptation to take those statements at face value is almost irresistible, and as misleading as we might be, say, in taking Joyce’s ‘Watching the Needleboats at San Sabba’ to be *about* something rather than to *be* something.

Drivers. Whatever the driver of the lyric, and however complex the lyricist, it will strike us all that there was a veritable explosion of this kind of self-expression in the Hellenic Archaic Age. It is as though a hunger for fresh verse forms was asserting itself throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and giving to culture a voice for what it did not yet know how to say. True to its Hellenic character itself, however, the lyric voice was by no means limited at the Hellenic moment to what was happening in Greece. India and Egypt were fertile (especially with love lyrics) at just the moment when Sappho was gazing into the eyes of Lesbia. And from Han Dynasty China, around the corner in the second century before Christ, there were things like this:

In the north there is a beautiful woman
She stands alone beyond compare.
She glances once, a city falls,
A kingdom falls.
Surely you know that a lady so fair,
She for whom cities and kingdoms fall,
Will never be found again.

trans. Frederic Will

Topic 7. Archilochus (c. 680–645 BC, Paros)

Meter and Self: Archilochus as Lyric Presence. We have stressed the importance of the dactylic hexameter (in Homer and Hesiod). With Archilochus (and the other lyric poets we discuss here) we come into a

pluralistic metrical world, in which, though there is ‘direct expression’ of the individual, as we have seen, there are multiple prosodic vehicles for that expression: the *iambic* meter (often, in Archilochus, used for ‘attack’ or ‘invective’ poetry); and various lyric meters, declarative (*trochaics*), *anapestic* (tripping and springing), and *dactylic*, an echo from the epic. The highly developed correlation between meter and argument, thought, or mood was at almost this same moment, in the development of the chorus of drama, bidding to become the defining center of an entire genre. One can easily deduce the internal finesse adjustments that the poet, in any of us at any time, must make in order to assure a mutual fructuation of narrative concept with ritual performance. The sensitivity of select communities, like that of the Spartans, to the correlation between moods and discipline, and the modes of music used to display them, was defining for the whole character of the Spartan polis.

Archilochus and the Remains of His Work. We know one date in Archilochus’ life, 648 BC, the occasion of a total eclipse of the sun over the Aegean: ‘Nothing in the world can surprise me now....for Zeus, father of the Olympians, has turned midday into black night by shielding light from the blossoming sun, and now dark terror hangs over mankind...’ (Fragment 74). Apart from that event, what we know of Archilochus comes from his own poems—and in that he hardly differed from the Athenians of the fifth century, about whose lives we know little. Their lives have largely to be reconstructed from material left to us a century later; much later comments from others, often embedded in texts/papyri reduced to a line or two, must frequently suffice as the building blocks for a biography.

Soldier. The evidence we deduce from Archilochus’ poems themselves suggests he was a mercenary soldier, that on one occasion he had thrown away his shield and fled from battle—or at least that he says that about himself, which is not the same thing. (Look at the fractured image of himself which a poet of our time like John Berryman leaves us in his *Dream Songs*. Self and self-presentation pass each other in the night in the contemporary lyric.) Archilochus says of himself that he had a fiery love for Neoboule (not ‘romantic’ but from the groin), that he preferred short, tough, individualistic fighting men to aristocratic pretty boys, and so on: from his remaining poems and fragments we can create (if we like) the profile of a Thasian fighting man with such and such swagger and bar room traits. We can do all this with no hesitation, checking ourselves only with the thought that the artist is frequently self-concealing and is not beyond highlighting features of himself which he has not but wishes he had. Might we reach out