

# The Iliad

By KENNETH REXROTH

**T**HE BEST-QUALIFIED CRITICS have always agreed that the first work of Western European literature has remained incomparably the greatest. In itself this is a revelation of the nature of the human mind and of the role of works of art. This is a popular judgment as well as a critical one. Today, over 2,500 years old, Homer competes successfully with current best-sellers, detective stories, and the most sensational and topical nonfiction.

Modern Americans may be the heirs of Western civilization, but all the elements of that civilization have changed drastically since Homer's day. The office worker who reads Homer on the subway bears little superficial resemblance either to Homer's characters or to his audience. Why should two long poems about the life of barbaric Greece have so great an appeal?

It was the fashion in the nineteenth century to deny the existence of Homer and to break up the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* into collections of folk ballads. Nothing disproves those theories more than this public reception. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been read by such a vast diversity of men because, as unitary works of art, they deal with universal experience with unsurpassed depth, breadth, and intensity. Each poem shows the powerful insight and organization that comes from the artistic craft of a complete person.

Men have argued about the *Iliad* for so long and raised so many side issues that it is easy for a critic to forget that it is formally a tragedy, saturated with a tragic sense of life and constructed with the inevitability of the tragedies of Orestes or Macbeth. It is a double tragedy—of Achilles and the Greeks, and of Hector and the Trojans, each reinforcing the other. To modern taste, the heroes are not the Greeks, who are portrayed as quarreling members of a warrior band, but the Trojans, men of family united in the community of the city-state.

Homer, like most later writers of epic—Teutonic, Irish, or Icelandic—portrays heroic valor as fundamentally destructive, not just of social order but of humane community. The Greeks are doomed by their characteristic virtues. Achilles sulks in his tent. Agamemnon has stolen his girl. The Greek camp is beset with a disorder that wastes all

good things. Underlying disorder is violence. Violence is not approved of in itself by the Greeks, but all the values they most admire—the nobility, pride and power, glamour and strength of barbaric chieftains—flourish only in the context of violence and must be fed by it continuously. Failure of these values provokes shame, the opposite of the assumption of responsibility, and shame provokes disaster.

On the other side of the wall the Trojans go their orderly and dignified ways. None of them approves of the crime of Paris but he is a member of the family of the King of Troy and the citizens of Troy are members one of another. So they assume his guilt in an act of collective responsibility. When the Greeks arrived before the walls of Troy, the Trojans could have thrown Paris and Helen out of the city. The invaders would have gone their way. When the *Iliad* opens, the Greeks have been fighting for ten years and are worn out with the moral attrition of war, while the Trojans have grown ever closer together in the consciousness of doom. "Our lot is best, to fight for our country," says Hector, and Homer implies a contrast with the Greeks who are fighting for themselves, each for his own valor and pride.

Greeks and Trojans are not the only protagonists of this tragedy. There is another community—the gods of Olympus. In the vast literature of Homeric criticism, I have never read a mention of what kind of community this was, of where in Homer's day he could have found an earthly parallel to such a group of people. The court of Zeus is precisely a court, like those to be found in the great empires of the ancient Near East, in Egypt, Babylon, or Persia. After Homer, for a few hundred years, Greek society strove to rise above the tyrant and the court of the tyrant. The Greeks of the classical period looked on the rulers of Persia or Egypt and their provincial imitators in the Greek world as at once frivolous and dangerous, because, in Greek opinion, they were motivated not by the moral consensus of

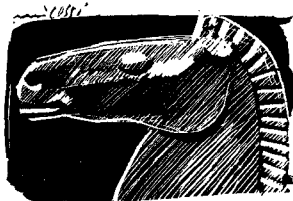
a responsible community but by the whims of what today we would call a collection of celebrities.

Homer contrasts the societies of the Greeks, the Trojans, and the Olympian gods as the three forms of political association that prevailed in the Heroic Age (a time that in fact, 400 years before, must have seemed almost as remote to him as his age does to us), namely the barbaric war band, the ancient, pre-Greek city-state, and the imperial court. He also contrasts men and gods as two disparate orders of being. The gods may behave like painted and perfumed courtiers of the Persian King of Kings, but they function also as conceptual forms of the forces of nature and of the forces that operate within the human personality on nonhuman levels. In this role, too, the tragedy of the *Iliad* reveals them as frivolous, dangerous, and unpredictable.

True, Homer speaks worshipfully at times of the gods, and especially of Zeus, but in terms of standardized flattery, empty of moral content. For Homer, utterly unlike the Jew or Moslem or Christian, the supernatural is devoid of value altogether. Value arises only in the relations of men. He contrasts two different systems of relationships, the epic chivalry of the Heroic Age war band of the Greeks, and the Trojan community of mutual respect and responsibility. The conflicts and resolutions and tragedies that beset the interactions of these human beings are all the good and evil there is in the *Iliad*. The gods contribute only chance, fate, doom, as amoral as so many roulette wheels.

Homer has been read for almost 3,000 years, and is read today by millions, because he portrayed men in the night-bound world of insensate circumstance as being each man to his fellow the only light there is, and all men to each other as the source of the only principle of order. This, says Homer, is the human condition. Out of it in the *Iliad* he constructed a dramatic architecture of a cogency never to be surpassed.

Each time I put down the *Iliad*, after reading it again in some new translation, or after reading once more the somber splendor of the Greek, I am convinced, as one is convinced by the experiences of a lifetime, that somehow, in a way beyond the visions of artistry, I have been face to face with the meaning of existence. Other works of literature give this insight, but none so powerfully, so uncontaminated by evasion or subterfuge. If the art of poetry is a symbolic criticism of value, the *Iliad* is the paramount classic of that art. Its purity, simplicity, definition, and impact reveal life and expose it to irrevocable judgment, with finality, at the beginning of European literature.



# WHAT DOES VIOLENCE SAY ABOUT MAN?

By JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

**"I** VERY MUCH LIKE to torture animals." So writes Salvador Dali in his modest *Diary of a Genius*. One of his deepest regrets is, so he goes on to say, that he has never had the pleasure of watching a lion die of starvation.

Now lions are expensive luxuries but rats and other small animals come cheap and a modest equivalent of the experience denied Dali is enjoyed by many adolescents in high schools that buy from one of the largest biological supply houses complete starvation kits that include various deficient diets and thus provide for a refinement which only modern science has made possible. The victims eat but they die even more slowly than if they were entirely deprived of food. Thus the pleasure of watching them is prolonged and it may be justified on the ground that it is "educational."

A century ago Charles Darwin told a Royal Commission that experiments involving cruelty to animals were "damnable" unless they contribute important knowledge unobtainable in any other way. And when Thomas Henry Huxley heard of a vivisectionist who said that he might give his victims an anesthetic to keep them quiet but not to spare them pain, Huxley wrote, "I would willingly agree to any law which would send him to the treadmill." Certainly high school students have no need to prove for themselves that dietary deficiencies can be fatal and they learn nothing but hardness of heart from either these experiments or from some of the others now popular—such as, for instance, the inoculation of rodents or chicks with cancer. In their literature class they probably read "The Ancient Mariner" and are asked to comment upon:

He prayeth best who loveth best  
All things both great and small.

But a bright student might be inclined to reply that praying in schools is forbidden anyhow, and at least one teacher is reported to have brushed criticism

aside by explaining that students were sternly forbidden to regard their victims as pets or to take any interest in them as individuals. Another teacher, when asked why it was necessary to perform actual experiments when published accounts and photographs were available, replied that "using live animals fascinates the youngsters." He added that it wouldn't do to stop the experiment before death ensued because death made it "more dramatic" and "the children are not convinced unless the critters die."



**T**HERE are, of course, laws against cruelty to animals, but I have never heard of a case where they were invoked to prevent any torture that claimed to have a scientific purpose. In fact, many, though not all, laboratory physiologists have bitterly opposed all the various bills introduced (chiefly, so far, without success) that would set up standards governing the treatment of laboratory animals—Senate Bill S1071, for instance. But does anyone dare say that no laboratory worker could possibly have a touch of sadism in him or even that routine familiarity with torture might make him callous? The very fact that laboratory experiments are conducted behind closed doors makes it all the more desirable that some sort of control or inspection be provided for. In England, where all possibly painful experiments must be licensed by the Home Office, eighty-eight biological fellows of the Royal Society answered a questionnaire in which they were asked whether or not they opposed these existing con-

trols, whether they believed they prevented the highest level of medical research, and whether they found in their own experience that control seriously frustrated legitimate results. Of the eighty-eight, only one replied "Yes" to any of the three questions; the rest gave a "No" to all three. Among comments from eminent persons were:

Sir Francis Walshe, F.R.S.: "A wide familiarity with the literature of experimental neuro-physiology leads me to think that in other countries where no such rational mode of control is used, quite a few futile and unnecessarily painful animal experiments are carried out by persons not always qualified to do them."

Professor A. T. Phillipson, deputy director of the Rowett Research Institute: "I am glad to hear the Americans are trying to introduce a bill similar to our Office Act."

Professor A. Habbow, F.R.S., director of the Chester Betty Cancer Research Institute: "I have, of course, been most interested to learn of the American bill and sorry to hear of opposition to it."

Nobel Prize-winner Professor H. A. Krebs: "I am very glad indeed to support a movement to introduce in the United States legislation similar to that operating in Great Britain. My answer to all three questions which you formulated at the end of your letter is a simple 'No.'"

**O**NE similar bill was recently introduced in one of the American state legislatures, whereupon an amendment was offered specifically exempting high school laboratories from any supervision or restriction. In the Middle Ages any cruelty was justified if it could be said to be in the defense of true religion; much the same is true today if science is substituted. But one does not have to oppose all vivisection to ask that the experimenter should be required to show, not merely that he could learn something from some horrible cruelty, but that what he could learn is important enough to be alleged as an excuse. I wonder, for instance, about the experiment recently reported to determine how much fire dogs could breathe without dying. The experimenter said that the Army "wanted to know." Why it wanted to know was not explained, but perhaps it was in order to make sure that its flame throwers were sufficiently lethal.

We like to tell ourselves that civilization has made us more humane. Our newspapers no longer carry advertisements like the following from a British periodical in 1730: "A mad bull, dressed up with fireworks, is to be turned loose . . . likewise a dog dressed up with fireworks; also a bear to be turned loose. N.B.—A cat is to be tied to the bull's