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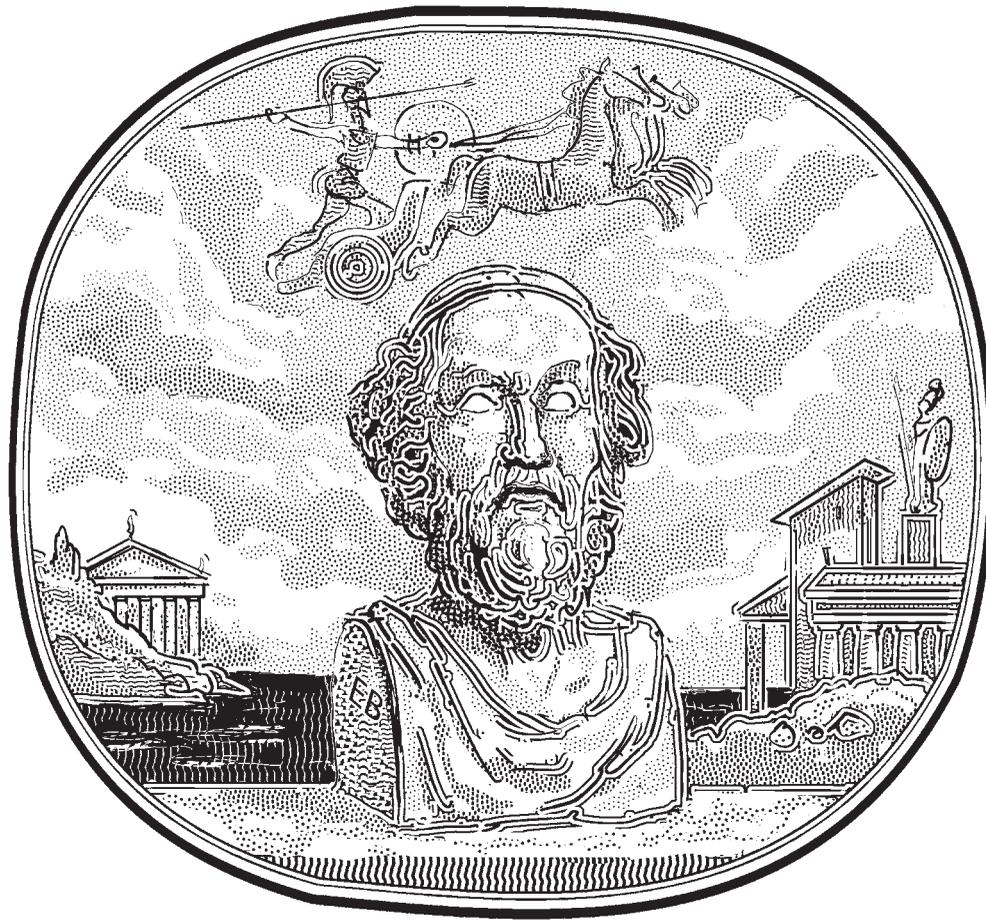
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Book Review by Anthony Esolen

SONG OF TROY

The Iliad, by Homer, translated by Peter Green.
University of California Press, 544 pages, \$29.95 (cloth), \$16.95 (paper)



SOMETIME AROUND THE 14TH CENTURY before Christ, a wealthy city near the coast of modern Turkey was destroyed by raiders coming from the west, and the plains of windy Troy knew her no more. Then the raiders themselves and their civilization, centered, we believe, in the city of Mycenae in Greece, overrun by invaders, also passed away, along with their language and their system of writing, and centuries of cultural darkness descended upon the land. But the stories of Troy did not pass into utter oblivion. It is hard for modern men to grasp how powerful the human memory can be, when praise of the gods or of bygone heroes is crafted in song. Troy fell, but the names and the deeds of her legendary attackers and defenders, whether or not they existed in fact—Agamemnon, Achilles, Menelaus, Odysseus, Paris, Aeneas, Hector—did not.

Imagine journeying on foot through a vast cold upland desert, here and there littered

with signs that men once dwelt there and flourished; a broken column, shards of pottery, an arm from a statue, a sword riddled with rust. Then you climb a high ridge and all at once you see below you a town bustling with action. There are gardens and orchards, and a broad deep river, and men building barges to float their goods to other towns downstream. There are large, handsome public buildings, with scribes recording the proceedings. There is a knot of boys sitting on the ground in front of a man with a white beard, instructing them in heroic song. Something like that is what happened when Greece awoke from her dark age, and, according to tradition, a blind poet named Homer, at the dawn of Western civilization itself, composed what many people consider to be our first and greatest songs, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Modern scholarship has not so much cast that legend in doubt as it has enriched it and made it appear, in some ways, more wondrous

still. For whoever composed the *Iliad*—we may as well call him Homer—was living in an age that saw the beginning of what we know as the Greek *polis*, while “remembering” a civilization of kings and the brute ethics of the warrior. He was living in an age that saw the beginning of philosophical and scientific investigation, while “remembering” the intractable passions that beat in the heart of man. He wove together songs from the misty past for the people who lived in his own time, with many a mysterious word and custom surviving in his poem like clues to a world gone by.

EVEN HIS RELIGION PARTOOK OF THIS strange, enriching half-memory. The peoples of the Mediterranean worshiped fertility gods, associated with the dark bowels of the earth-mother, the womb of all things and their destined tomb. The invaders who destroyed Mycenae, rich in gold, did not. They came from the steppes of Eurasia, with



the great open sky above them. Their gods dwelt above, in light. They spoke an Indo-European language, related to what their cultural cousins would be speaking in Italy and Scandinavia and the British Isles and Persia and India. From them the Greeks derived their new, youthful gods of Olympus, dwelling atop the mountain where they drank not blood but ambrosia, where, along with the intrigue and violence that are inseparable from all polytheistic systems, they knew celebration and laughter and song. The fertility gods were banished to the underworld, where they too were “remembered,” just as Mycenae was remembered: Mother Earth, Night, Cronus, most of the Titans, the Furies, and Death, most hated of all the gods, because Death will not listen to appeal.

And so it was that the Greeks were fairly compelled to ask the questions that we associate with the height of their intellectual flourishing: What is the relationship between reason and the passions? What do we make of the conflict between a man’s desire for glory and his duty to his companions? What is the authority of a ruler when the common good is in question? In what does a truly good life consist? No matter what my beloved Plato said when he banished the poets from his imaginary republic, Homer had long ago asked the philosophical and moral questions that Plato asked, and we might justifiably say that only Greece, so strangely situated as she was, could have brought us both.

I HAVE DEEMED THIS BRIEF CULTURAL INTRODUCTION necessary to scout any notion that Homer’s *Iliad* is either a pastiche of old and sometimes incompatible songs and traditions, or a cartoon epic, full of long episodes of carnage, interjected with scenes of adolescent gouching and trash-talk. It is a profoundly philosophical and therefore *human* poem, asking great questions and venturing but tentative answers. It exhibits order in and among all its parts, each reflecting and deepening the other, so that we cannot think of Achilles and his ambiguous devotion to glory without thinking of Hector and his more grudging choice of glory over the sweetness of the family life and civic life he so deeply loves; nor can we think of Helen and her dangerous charms without thinking of the artless Andromache; or the stubborn sulking of Achilles without thinking of his longing for the homeland and the father he knows he will never see again.

So a new translation of the *Iliad* warrants attention, especially when it is executed by so eminent an elder scholar in the classics as Peter Green. Green has done about everything

that a classical man of letters could do. He has written acclaimed chronicles of the Hellenistic world, including a biography of Alexander the Great and the cultural history *The Shadow of the Parthenon* (1972). He has written fiction inspired by that world: Robert Graves gave us the fictional memoirs of Claudius, and Green went back to the source of the decadence, giving us the fictional memoirs of the warlord with a reformist streak, Sulla. Green has translated Ovid and Juvenal and Apollonius of Rhodes, and now, to fulfill a long-held desire, he gives us his translation of the *Iliad*.

Green combines prodigious knowledge of the language of the poem and the history surrounding it, with the astute judgment that used to characterize the scholar, weighing evidence, suggesting possibilities, never compelling a work of art to dance to a modish political or theoretical tune. Not surprisingly, he makes the more conservative of the two paradigmatic choices of the translator. That is, Green wishes above all to make the *strangeness* and the Greek *peculiarity* of the original available to the read-

More than a translation, Peter Green has given us the distilled results of decades of his close reading and careful research.

er without Greek, rather than to render the Greek into a current argot. The former sort of translator strives for accuracy and is willing to put up with—or to embrace—a certain distance from the reader; the latter sort strives for an immediate impression and is willing to lose what is strange, sometimes even what is grand. The former sort of translator preserves, for example, the suggestiveness of the Hebrew, and writes, “And Adam knew his wife,” while the second abandons the original verb, and writes, “And Adam had relations with his wife.” Of course there are quite a few variations of these paradigms, not to mention translations that waver between them, with varying degrees of fidelity to the bumps and grooves of literal or figurative language.

LET ME GIVE AN EXAMPLE BY COMPARING Green with a very good translator of the second sort, Stanley Lombardo. The scene is in Book 4. Agamemnon, having been shamed in front of all his men at the beginning of the poem, is now making the rounds of the troops, going from camp to

camp, speaking to each of the leaders in turn. Sometimes he praises; more often his words are laced with masculine insults, some of them meant well, others not so well. When he sees the wily Odysseus, who has not yet heard the call to action, Agamemnon accuses him of being an idler (Achilles has by now retreated to his tent, on the outs with Agamemnon), a profiteer (Agamemnon himself has alienated Achilles because of his greed), and quicker to feast than to fight (Agamemnon will end up sending Odysseus to have dinner with Achilles and to try to persuade him to rejoin the ranks). Odysseus won’t put up with it. Here is how Lombardo renders his reply:

What kind of talk is that, Agamemnon?
How can you say we are slack in battle
Whenever the Greeks engage the Trojans?
You will have a chance to see, if you really care,
How Telemachus’ father mixes it up
With the horse-whipping Trojans.
What you’re saying now is a lot of hot air.

The translation doesn’t preserve the roll of Homer’s long hexameter, nor does it proceed line by line, nor does it possess any audible meter of its own, with the lines ranging from three to five strong stresses. Its strength is its immediacy and its spirited colloquialism. Its climax, “a lot of hot air,” is a clever way to get across the Greek *anemolia*: big winds, bluster. Lombardo includes Homer’s common epithet for the Trojans, usually rendered as *horse-breaking* or *breakers of horses*: it will indeed be the final word in the poem, applied to the body of the dead Hector, which Achilles at last surrenders to the grieving King Priam of Troy. But he feels no need to include it everywhere it appears, so he omits it from his third line above, not wanting to slow the pace of the reader.

Here is Green’s translation:

Son of Atreus, what’s this talk that’s escaped
the barrier of your teeth?
How can you say that we hold back from the
fighting whenever
we Achaians make bitter war on the horse-
breaker Trojans?
You’ll see—if you care to, if you have the
slightest interest—
Telemachos’s dear father engaged with the
front line fighters
of these same horse-breaker Trojans. Your
words are empty wind.

ALL TRANSLATORS MUST CHOOSE WHAT they will have at all costs, what they will strive hard to attain if it is possible, what they will concede, and what they will take as the gift of a capricious Muse. Green’s



lines are mighty and sonorous where Lombardo's are not. They are mainly cast in an accented English hexameter, which can roll along swiftly enough, but which sometimes suffers the logjam of a series of English monosyllables. They are one to one with the Greek, preserving Homer's word-order and his emphasis, beginning and ending lines where Homer began and ended them. If Homer uses a figure of speech, Green wants that figure, come what may. Hence the risky business about words that have "escaped the barrier of your teeth." If that sounds strange to us, perhaps it should sound strange. We might think of the fighting man as his own walled city, holding hard words within the ramparts, lest they engage in a foolish sally and meet misfortune. It certainly does emphasize, as Lombardo's phrasing does not, one of the poem's central problems: the speaking of words that cannot be taken back. Green is very fine at unlocking figurative Greek compounds, which are really quite like the kennings of Anglo-Saxon epic. Here for instance is Achilles, blowing up at Agamemnon at the outset of the poem. The insecure king has grudgingly agreed to give one of his hostage women to her father, a priest of Apollo who paid Agamemnon back for his initial insults and refusal. The priest begs Apollo to rain down upon them the far-striking arrows of plague, and the god gladly obliges. So now Agamemnon is shamed before his men, and deprived of the girl, without any ransom. Humility and repentance are good Christian virtues. They are dread problems for the Greek. Agamemnon declares that he will seize someone else's girl hostage to make up for his loss—and the someone else proves to be Achilles. Then the swift-footed young man bursts out:

You wine-sodden wretch, dog-faced, deer-hearted, not once have you dared to arm yourself for battle with your troops, or joined in an ambush with the Achaian chieftains! Oh no, such things spell death to you. Better by far to range here through the broad camp of the Achaians and take back the gifts of whoever speaks out against you!
A king that feeds off his commons!

That first line is muscular, with its battery of compounds, leading off with "wine-sodden"—*oinobares*—and descending into more and more shameful accusations, until we come to *demoboros*—"a king that feeds off his commons." He who should be the shepherd to his people is a belly-swaggering wolf with the courage of Bambi.

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT TASKS for the modern translator is how to treat subtle changes in the linguistic register, when our current patois is so flat and monochrome. If German is for speaking to your horse, today's English is for writing a memorandum to your accountant. The horse is more interesting. The trouble is especially acute when we are dealing with whatever pierces beyond the bounds of ordinary life: worship, death, love. Then the translator too often becomes like a jaded visitor to an old cathedral when Mass is going on; he coughs, looks aside, and ducks out as fast as he can. I have observed the phenomenon in plenty of translators, who cannot help themselves but must indulge a need to reduce the original and render it tame. Not Green. He has an ear for the shadings of ceremony in Homer's rhetoric; he is not shy of the kind of formality that can elevate human feeling, quietly and surely, to the sublime. Here is Hector, speaking to his wife within the walls of Troy, sadly foreseeing the end he has striven so long to delay:

For this I know well, in my heart and in my mind:
A day will come when sacred Ilion will perish,
with Priam, lord of the fine ash spear, and Priam's people.
Yet it's not the Trojans' coming miseries that so concern me—
not what Hekabē will endure, or our sovereign Priam,
or my brothers, so many, so valiant, who all may end up trodden into the dust by their hate-filled enemies—no,
it's your grief I think of, when some bronze-corsleted Achaian will lead you away, weeping, your day of freedom gone.

Other than "concern"—that note slightly flat—this is all quite fine, and all the better for its elevation. Nothing less should suffice for the courtly Hector and his gentle wife.

WE MAY WELL RECALL THAT MOMENT when, near the end of the poem, Hector must at last face his enemy Achilles in single combat, the best of the Greeks and the best of the Trojans, and Hector, hoping against hope, wonders whether he could persuade Achilles to accept a generous peace. But Hector knows better, and the man's mind returns—Green rightly calls the language "unbearably moving"—to the peace he loves better than war:

There's no way now, from oak tree or from rock,
to sweet-talk him, oh, like a girl and her young man—
a girl and her young man!—flirting with one another

Perfect, that. I should like to end with a crucial consideration. Peter Green has given us more than a translation here. He has given us the distilled results of decades of his close reading and careful research into Greek history and civilization. In other words, he has given us a fine textbook for teachers and students, and for readers who are not unfamiliar with Homer, but who are not on easy terms with him either. This is something that many a translator these days either cannot do or refuses to do. The book is buttressed with a helpful introduction, a synopsis, copious but not ostentatiously scholarly notes, an enormous glossary or onomasticon, explaining who's who and where's where, and an index to help the reader find exactly where which person in the poem is doing what. The notes are blessedly free of the wrecking ball of literary theory, which reduces many a great work of art to rubble, one heap pretty much indistinguishable from another. Everything is oriented towards helping us to understand the poem *on its terms*, and to appreciate its intricacy and subtlety, its grandeur and pathos, and its incomparable beauty.

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