

Homer in German Classicism: Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, Hölderlin and Schelling

JOACHIM WOHLLEBEN

In 1869 Friedrich Nietzsche delivered his Inaugural Oration as Professor of Classical Philology in Basel. The address was entitled "On the Personality of Homer." In this famous address he remarked on the period of German Classicism: "On every side one feels that for almost a century the philologists have lived together with poets, thinkers, and artists. For this reason it has come about that that former heap of ashes and lava, which used to be called Classical Antiquity, has now become fertile, indeed thriving pasture land."¹

"For almost a century"—by this he meant the period that extended from the middle of the eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth. In fact this period in Germany was notable because of its unusually narrow symbiosis between philology and belles-lettres. What had been handed down from classical antiquity was the common possession of the educated. The rise of German literature cannot be explained without notice of its intensive connection with Greek poetry. As part of the "Rediscovery" of the Greeks at the cost of the Romans there arose a particular interest in the Father of all European poetry, Homer. His epics aroused enthusiastic interest manifested in three ways: 1) the attempts to make ever more accurate translations a part of German literature; 2) attempts by poets to write German imitations; 3) attempts by scholars to solve the riddle of the

¹ See *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, II, 1, ed. by F. Bommann and M. Carpitella: *Philologische Schriften (1867–1873)* (Berlin and New York 1982) 267. For general treatments of the subject of this paper see: H. Clarke, *Homer's Readers: A Historical Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Newark, London, and Toronto 1981); C. Ephraim, *Wandel des Griechenbildes im achtzehnten Jahrhundert (Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder)* (Bern and Leipzig 1936); G. Finsler, *Homer in der Neuzeit von Dante bis Goethe: Italien, Frankreich, England, Deutschland* (Leipzig and Berlin 1912; repr. Hildesheim 1973); J. L. Myres, *Homer and his Critics*, ed. by D. Gray (London 1958); W. Rehm, *Griechentum und Goethezeit: Geschichte eines Glaubens* (Leipzig 1936); K. Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth-Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic (1688–1798)* (Cambridge 1979); P. Szondi, *Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie I: Antike und Moderne in der Ästhetik der Goethezeit*, ed. by S. Metz and H. H. Hildebrandt (Frankfurt am Main 1974).

early origin of the Homeric poems. That is poets, thinkers, and philologists were united in a common endeavor.

I shall say a word on the position of Germany in Europe at this time. The great "quarrel of the ancients and the moderns" at the time of Louis XIV had started with the poetry of Homer and had chosen the *Iliad* as the paragon of non-modern poetry. By now the quarrel was over. The modernists were the victors. In Germany there was general agreement that progress was possible in literature and in culture as well.

German writers and critics were inspired by the English, not the French. The books on Homer by Thomas Blackwell, Robert Wood, and Edward Young were all translated into German by 1770.² They aroused much interest and determined the direction of German research. The important question was no longer one of whether Homer had possessed the necessary decency and adequate court manners; rather the question was now: Is it possible by means of historical, ethnographical, archaeological, or other reconstructions of early Greece to gain an insight and understanding of Homer's time? Just how did the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* arise? The discovery of Homer, in so far as it grew at the expense of Vergil, was part of the rejection of French cultural superiority.

One never finds in German literature (with the possible exception of Kleist's *Penthesilea*) a creative reworking of Homer such as is found in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. There is a further point. German thinkers and theoreticians rarely took Homer as their model for the most lofty historical speculation on which to base a whole theory of the evolution of human culture, as for example Giambattista Vico did in 1725 with his *Scienza nuova*.

On the contrary the century of Homer's creative influence in Germany reveals a remarkable tendency toward highly subjective theories, indeed extremist approaches and interpretations. From Winckelmann (ca. 1760), the founder of modern historical archaeology, to Heinrich Schliemann, the notorious excavator of Troy and Mycenae (ca. 1870), there extends a phalanx of Homer-enthusiasts, each of whom drew his own picture of Homer, the first poet, the spirit of epic, the beginning of Greek culture, naive man and so on.

Winckelmann, for example, before his famous move to Rome led a wretched existence in the Mark Brandenburg and in Dresden as a village schoolmaster and librarian. He lived entirely in his books, indulging in a dream-world of Mediterranean beauty, physical and artistic beauty, and,

² Thomas Blackwell, *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London 1735), translated by J. H. Voss (Leipzig 1776); Robert Wood, *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (London 1769), translated by Chr. F. Michaelis (Frankfurt 1773); and Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London 1759), translated by H. E. von Teubern (Leipzig 1760).

driven by pagan instinct, during Protestant church-services read in the *Odyssey* rather than the Gospels. "I prayed in Homeric similes," he said.

Winckelmann was the first one who, as part of his secularisation of edifying pietistic ideas, raised up Homer to the level of Holy Writ and turned Homer into a saint, who advocated the Gospel of the World's Beauty rather than commandments to do or not to do something. He made a private Homer for his own use, consisting of selected quotations from the poet. This became his aesthetic catechism. A number of times, for example, he cites *Odyssey* 20. 18:

τέτλαθι δῆ, κραδίη· καὶ κύντερον ἄλλο ποτ' ἔτλης.

Endure, my heart; something more humiliating than this you once endured.

He also included citations that had to do with his despair and his often hopeless situation, for example, the remark of the bard Phemios (*Od.* 22. 347 f.):

αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας
παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν.

I am self-taught; a god has implanted in my mind all the pathways of song.

From now on it became privilege and ambition to read Homer in the original. And in general Homer became the point of comparison for literary criticism. Lessing used the description of the shield in *Iliad* 18 as the starting point for his highly successful comparison of the visual arts and poetry in his *Laokoon* of 1766. The young Herder replied to it with lively engagement in his earliest publication (*Erstes kritisches Wäldchen* 1769).

The youthful group of "Sturm und Drang" and the Göttingen "Hainbund" were inspired by the idea of a natural, primeval condition of mankind which allowed them to avoid first the dry, rationalistic narrowness of modern civilization (especially the exaggerated materialism of Holbach and Helvetius) and also the old-fashioned Protestant admonitions that encouraged contrition, denigration of the body, and the metaphysical awareness of one's sinful state. In this context, along with the great discovery of Shakespeare, these young men sought the liberation of body and soul in the pure, uncontaminated state of mankind that they found in Homer.

These young writers composed poems to Homer, the good father of poets. Graf Leopold von Stolberg did, for example, as did J. H. Voss, to whom Homer appeared in a dream and consecrated him to the task of translation. In Goethe's epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the hero with his impressionable mind loses himself in the primeval idyll of the *Odyssey*, where the swineherd Eumaios tends his beloved, unrecognized master. Under the open sky Werther prefers to read in "his Homer." As soon as his melancholy spirit abandons Homer and turns to the mournful

gushing of Ossian, his fate is sealed and nothing can save him from self-destruction.

In the 1770's Homeric poetry became the common concern of bourgeois Protestant education in Germany. The problem of a definitive translation of Homer which preserved his hexameters and allowed them to be imitated more and more closely in German was successfully dealt with. This was a task to which Johann Heinrich Voss devoted many years. In 1776 appeared the flamboyant, youthful version of the *Iliad* by Stolberg (already in hexameters). In 1781 the first version of Voss' *Odyssey* was published. In 1793 his *Iliad* followed.³

It goes without saying that the great period of German literature, the so-called classical-romantic decades around 1800, had concentrated on Homer, mainly in an attempt at clarifying the question what the modern age in contrast to classical antiquity could really be and what genuine form of art and poetry was conceivable for that time. All the great men of the time shared in this discussion. Herder throughout his life was torn between his great love for Homer's poetry—in this he differed little from Winckelmann, whose emphasis on artistic beauty he was quite able to share—and a false, unhistorical conception of Homer, which could only deceptively grasp from far away the object of his sentimental desire across the abyss of epochal time. Because of this contradiction, Herder resisted every attempt to seek in Homer a model for modern poetry. His whole reluctant love for Homer, which he forbade himself, is expressed in a succinct phrase in the chapter about the Greeks in his masterpiece, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*: "Homer sang, but not for us."⁴ Important poets of the pre-classical and classical periods, such as G. A. Bürger, Wieland, Klopstock, and Voss, brooded over Homer. Schiller in his important essays on poetry treated Homer as an indispensable historical paradigm for the theory of genre. In Schiller's philosophical lyric as well, Homer the poet and his enigmatic works occasionally play a role. Wilhelm von Humboldt published in 1798 a voluminous study of Goethe's bourgeois epic, *Hermann und Dorothea*. On close reading it amounts to an analysis of Homeric epic. We read in Hölderlin's writings profound meditations and sublime ideas of the importance of Homer for all European culture.

It continues in this way in the generation of the Romantics as well. The philosophers of idealism created their own theories of Homer. Schelling's "Philosophy of Art" can serve as an example. There Homer is not only the first poet of Europe but also, strangely enough, the last. Obviously the central figure of the period, Goethe, thought profoundly about Homer. In the great congregation of Homer-enthusiasts he is perhaps

³ For Voss' translation of Homer see the authoritative study of G. Häntzschel, *Johann Heinrich Voss: Seine Homer-Übersetzung als sprachschöpferische Leistung*, *Zetemata* 68 (Munich 1977).

⁴ *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan, XIV (Berlin 1877) 146.

the most striking in so far as he dared to compose Homeric poetry, something which, according to the theorists, should have been impossible. The case of Goethe is remarkable as well in regard to his reaction to a contemporary event which provided a great challenge to all those I have mentioned, from Herder on, especially the greatest critic of the epoch, Friedrich Schlegel. In 1795 appeared a pioneer work of modern philology. Friedrich August Wolf, Professor of Classical Philology in Halle, published his famous *Prolegomena ad Homerum sive de operum Homericorum prisca et genuina forma variisque mutationibus et probabili ratione emendandi* (Halle 1795).

Nietzsche's observation that the philologists had lived with poets and thinkers is best proven by the case of Wolf. He was the mentor and friend of Wilhelm von Humboldt at the beginning of the nineties. Toward the end of the decade he corresponded with and worked with Goethe, who in 1805 invited him to provide a chapter in a cooperative volume entitled *Winckelmann and his Age*. Wolf contributed a survey on philology in early eighteenth century Germany. Wolf's later treatise, "A Description of Ancient Studies" (1807), proves the influence by then of Humboldt's and Schiller's theories of Greek poetry and the relation in which it stands to modern German poetry. We have there an example of the fortunate symbiosis of philology with the poets and thinkers to which Nietzsche alluded.

But it was just for the poets that the *Prolegomena* became a great problem, indeed a provocation. One learned from Wolf about the gradual development of epic and the pre-literate transmission of the poetry, which led to the unwelcome conclusion rightly or wrongly (it is still undecided) that one author Homer, creator of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, had never existed. For the poets, inspired by Homer, that was a sort of sacrilege. For Wolf had exterminated the father of all poets. Who was now to receive all the reverence of the worshippers? From many varying examples I shall concentrate on four important reactions: Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, Hölderlin, Schelling—two poets and two thinkers.

First Goethe. In his case philology and poetic creativity for a brief historical moment formed an unusual coalition. Initially Goethe reacted as it were instinctively with revulsion against Wolf's hypothesis as he understood it. For him as for so many contemporaries Wolf was the exterminator of Homer. Goethe after his first reading of the *Prolegomena* in May 1795 protested against the attack on the person of Homer. He accused Wolf of devastating "the most fruitful gardens of the kingdom of literature," and Wolf had done it from scholarly arbitrariness. He agreed with Schiller that it was an act of barbarism. He declared emphatically that as a poet he basically had other interests than those of a critic. A poet composes; a critic decomposes. But for no apparent reason a sudden change occurred. In a few months Goethe had changed sides to the party of the destructive critic. In his personal letters to Wolf his change is clearly documented. Goethe states

there that acquaintance with Wolf's work "marked a new era in his life and work." He wished "to become acquainted with Wolf's ideas" and remarked in somewhat elusive phrasing: "I shall treat and think through in my way this matter which is so very important."⁵ Indeed, he goes so far as to welcome Wolf's discovery. How did this happen? The answer is that in thinking over Wolf's hypothesis Goethe was led to an entirely different conception of what he was capable of as a poet. He became an epic poet. He became a Homerid, composing his own bourgeois epic, *Hermann und Dorothea*. What is so remarkable is that earlier he was not a Homerid and that only after the ruin of Homer was he able to create Homeric poetry. This apparent paradox can be explained in the following way.

In the period of his classical poetry, that is between the return from Italy, with the outbreak of the French Revolution, and the death of Schiller, Goethe sought to introduce the great traditional genres into German literature. Thus he wrote German love elegies after Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid (*Roman Elegies* [1795]), Epistles in the style of Horace, Epigrams after the model of Martial. He planned an Aeschylean tragedy, a *Prometheus*. After the completion of his great novel, *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister*, he experimented with hexametric epyllia (*Alexis and Dora*) and stated that he had the intention of concentrating all his effort on epic poetry and, at the end of his career, of succeeding in composing one.⁶

We must however take notice of a second peculiarity of his creativity in order to understand his striking handling of the problem posed by Wolf. Many works of Goethe are motivated by a powerful response to an overwhelming impression which seemed almost a threat rather than an inspiration to him. He had to create in order to save himself. So for instance his first published work, his drama *Goetfried von Berlichingen*, was a response to his encounter with Shakespeare. In old age his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) grew from his confrontation with the Persian lyrics of Hafiz. In this context we understand that his bourgeois epic, *Hermann und Dorothea*, derives from his impression of Homer. On the other hand he had been studying the Homeric epics for years before. In *Werther* the *Odyssey* plays a decisive role. But this never led him to the reproduction of Homeric poetry in German. How do we explain this? The very greatness of Homer discouraged imitation.

Now Wolf appeared and with incontestable arguments abolished an historical Homer who was greater than life. Goethe himself speaks of "the one and only." Here is what he writes to Wolf: "Possibly I shall soon send to you rather boldly the announcement of an epic poem in which I do not conceal how much I owe to your recent teaching. For a long time I was inclined to venture into this matter but I always felt overawed by the lofty conception of the unity and indivisibility of the Homeric poems. But now

⁵ *Goethes Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe IV. 10. 420 (June 1795).

⁶ *Ibidem*, IV. 11. 233 ff. (17 October 1796, to F. H. Jacobi).

because you have made these works part of a family, it seems less audacious to share in that great society and follow the path which Voss has so beautifully traced for us in his *Luise*. Because I am not disposed to test your writing theoretically, I hope that you will not be unsatisfied with my concrete approval."⁷

In an elegiac poem with the title *Hermann und Dorothea*, Goethe spoke publicly of his conversion:

Here is to the health of the man who has finally boldly freed us from the glorious name of Homer, who encourages us to share in the contest! For who dared to struggle with gods? And who with the One? But now to be a Homeric, even if the last, is beautiful.⁸

So, the destruction of a great model was to be welcomed. In this case it was the precondition of being able to follow him. That is the paradox of Goethe's *Homeridentum*. Should we believe him? Certainly not entirely. The detour over the results of Wolf's research was rather a wilful self-deception. Surely of first importance was the will to attempt an epic. But Goethe was quite aware of the artistic risk of a violent modernizing of Homer. Nonetheless, we must have a modern epic. Today we detect in *Hermann und Dorothea* rather the sentimental and bourgeois character and miss the genuinely Homeric heroism and the role of the gods. Yet Goethe was dissatisfied with his newly discovered *Homeridentum*. He sought to become an even more authentic follower of Homer and designed an *Achilleis*. There he hoped to provide the narrative link between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But he failed with this violent classicism. His *Achilleis* never went further than a second book. Already in 1798 when Goethe read Friedrich Schlegel's first Homeric contribution, written in the spirit of Wolf, he again changed his conception of Homer. He returned to his earlier belief in the poetic unity of the *Iliad*. His intermezzo with Wolf was over. The point of this intermezzo had not been to provide a documented, philological view of Homer, but rather to create an Homeric work. Now again his reverence for the sublime unity of the *Iliad* prevailed. In May 1798 he confessed to Schiller: "I am more convinced than ever of the unity and indivisibility of the poem. Absolutely no man lives anymore, nor shall he ever be born, who will be capable of evaluating it."⁹ Goethe stresses from now on the "indivisibility" of the epics. He rejects the Lay-theory or that of the rhapsodes as the obtuse pursuit of philologists. The man Homer appeared to him now to be less important. His later little poem "Homer

⁷ *Ibidem*, IV. 11. 296 (26 December 1796, to F. A. Wolf).

⁸ *Ibidem*, I. 1. 293 f.

⁹ *Ibidem*, IV. 13. 148 (16 May 1798, to Schiller).

again Homer" is well known. In it he regrets his earlier Wolfian fall and confesses his return to an unquestioning Unitarianism.¹⁰

You have with ingenuity
From any reverence set us free.
And we confessed too liberally
That *Iliad* but a patchwork be.

May this defection raise no ire;
For Youth can urge us with its fire
Rather to think of it as One
And so delight in One alone.

Goethe as a creative poet had replied to Wolf in an unusually indirect way. The great literary critic of the period, Friedrich Schlegel, replied in a quite different way. In 1796 appeared an essay, "On Homeric Poetry," with the subtitle: With Reference to Wolf's Researches. Two years later he expanded this as part of the first volume of his unfinished *History of the Poetry of the Greeks and Romans*. Schlegel was inspired by Wolf not to think about the man Homer, who scarcely interested him at all, but rather to sketch a phenomenology of the Epic, which in its way could scarcely be more radical. The instability of the epic narrative, which in fact had been Wolf's theme and had led to his historical conclusions concerning its varied transformations, seduced Schlegel to a special theory of the "Unbestimmtheit," the vagueness, of the Epic. By this he did not mean the boundless myths of the Cycle, from which epic narrative took its start; but he defined epic as a so-to-speak formless form.

We must understand his intentions. First Schlegel struggled against Aristotle. We can attribute that disagreement to youthful spirit. He indicted Aristotle—with some justice—on the charge that he had brought the poetic unity of the epic all too close to the principle of tight unity which held for the drama. For example Aristotle stresses a central hero as a central unifying factor, something which Schlegel vehemently discards. Schlegel opposed the all too logical impulse to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Secondly, Schlegel liked paradoxes. He loved the paradoxical definition. Therefore, he defined the epic as a form which has no limit. For him epic is a form without end. "In epic poetry there is really no complex plot and no denouement, as one finds in drama and even in lyric poetry. At every point in the flow of epic narrative one finds tension and release." Further: "This epic harmony is so very different from the closed world of drama, as a single poetic action is from an indefinite mass of poetic events." He distinguished, that is, between the *Handlung* of drama and the *Begebenheiten* of epic

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, I. 3. 159. The translation by M. Jacobs is taken from Myres (above, note 1) 86 n. 1. For details see J. Wohlleben, "Goethe and the Homeric Question," *Germanic Review* 42 (1967) 251–75. For a useful collection of Goethe's views on Homer see E. Grumach, *Goethe und die Antike: Eine Sammlung I* (Potsdam 1949) 117–218.

narrative: between action and simple occurrences. In epic “every occurrence is a link in an endless chain, the consequence of earlier ones and the germ of those to come.”¹¹

What Schlegel thinks about Homeric epic in part derives from ancient tradition. Epic always begins *in mediis rebus* and really has no end. These sources he cites extensively. He even calls up Homer himself as witness and recalls the bards of the *Odyssey*: Demodokos at the court of the Phaiakians, Phemios at Ithaka, and the nameless bard at the court of Menelaos and what Homer said of their endless store of knowledge and tales. He recalls Odysseus’ words to Alkinoos (*Od.* 9. 14):

τί πρῶτόν τοι ἔπειτα, τί δ’ ὑστάτιον καταλέξω;

What shall I say to you first? What last?

Or what Eumaios said about Odysseus’ stories (*Od.* 17. 518 ff.):

ὡς δ’ ὅτ’ ἀοιδὸν ἀνὴρ ποτιδέρκεται, ὅς τε θεῶν ἔξ
ἀείδη δεδαῶς ἔπε’ ἡμερόεντα βροτοῖσι,
τοῦ δ’ ἄμοτον μεμάασιν ἀκούμεν, ὅππότε’ ἀείδη·

Even as when a man gazes upon a minstrel who sings to mortals songs of longing that the gods have taught him, and their desire to hear him has no end whensoever he sings.

Or Helen’s remark in the palace of Menelaos (*Od.* 4. 240 ff.):

πάντα μὲν οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ’ ὀνομήνω,
ὅσσοι Ὀδυσσεύος ταλασίφρονός εἰσιν ἄεθλοι.

All things I cannot tell or recount, even all the labors of Odysseus of the steadfast heart.

All these citations are adduced to prove the consistent boundlessness of epic narrative, which stops nowhere and can start anywhere. One must see that his theory of a paradoxical aesthetic category for a work that has no boundaries was intended to provoke the fundamental classicistic assumptions of the Weimar Dioskouroi, Goethe and Schiller. Schlegel was in no way ready or even capable of sketching an objective poetics of epic. He limited himself to striking metaphors that illustrate his idea of the inherent endlessness of epic. He and his elder brother and ally, August Wilhelm Schlegel, chose for instance a bas-relief as a point of comparison. A. W. Schlegel writes: “The epic is the bas-relief of poetry. Here the figures are not arranged in order but they follow one another as far as possible in a series of profiles. The bas-relief by its very nature is endless. When we find a mutilated one from the frieze of a ruined temple or a section of one broken on both sides, we are able in our minds to extend it backwards and

¹¹ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (= *KFSA*) I, ed. by E. Behler: *Studien des Klassischen Altertums* (Paderborn, Munich, and Vienna 1979) 124 ff.

forwards without requiring a precise end."¹² The garden of Alkinoos can also serve to support the brothers Schlegel. There the fruits are forever ripening and seasons play no role.

This is what Schlegel concludes. Epic is a creation each of whose parts is of equal value with the whole, in the sense that in each part the plan of the whole structure is evident and realized. He says: "It is everywhere apparent that the innermost feature and the true essence of Homeric epic are that the smallest segment is formed and constructed precisely like the whole."¹³ What he means becomes clear when one contrasts the law of classical drama, where every part, whether a scene or an act, is part of a rigid unity and can never be moved or replaced.

Friedrich Schlegel summarizes what he means in a succinct metaphor:

The epic poem is, if I may so express myself, a poetical octopus, where every limb, whatever its size, has its own life and indeed possesses as much harmony as does the whole.¹⁴

Many experiments were made with the octopus (or polyp) around 1780, especially by Lichtenberg at Göttingen. He found that from the smallest part, when amputated, a new creature could grow. It was also learned that groups of octopi can join together to form one large one. This is a close natural analogy to the Homeric epic. Schlegel characterized a phenomenon that could be divided into endless parts but at the same time had the ability endlessly to combine. He formulated his aperçu epigrammatically: "The Homeric epithet is a small rhapsody and the rhapsody is a large epithet."

One can say that with his definition of epic Schlegel supplemented by his wilful poetic elucidations the historical and philological deductions of F. A. Wolf. Wolf, as an historian of literature, had postulated that epic arose from an aggregate of mythical tradition, no longer available to us, which was synthesized in a way not clear to us into the compilation and revision that we call Homer. This Schlegel sought through his analogy from nature to make plausible and understandable.

Something unclear and unsatisfactory nevertheless remains with Schlegel's definition of "Unbestimmtheit." In order to clarify the matter a bit, one must recall that Schlegel's ideal was not Homer but Sophoclean tragedy. It is conceivable that he had composed his history of Greek literature in such a way that it would culminate in tragedy as the absolutely "bestimmt" genre. Here, probably, is concealed speculation that he owed to Fichte. He stressed too strongly that Epic was an imperfect genre still without contour and too general for one to be able to write its history. Schlegel saw in Homer a form of poetic composition that was only

¹² August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. by E. Lohner, III: *Geschichte der Klassischen Literatur* (1802) (Stuttgart 1964) 110.

¹³ *KFSA* I. 521.

¹⁴ *KFSA* I. 131.

objective, in lyric one that was only subjective, but in tragedy he saw the successful fusion of these two extremes. The fact that his history of Greek literature broke off after the first volume (1798) prevented the detailed justification of a rather nebulous theory.

After the poet Goethe, who only occasionally and with a specific aim entered the terrain of historical philology, and Friedrich Schlegel, who was qualified to make a substantial contribution to Homeric scholarship, we shall turn to two figures who purposely never became involved in the revolutionary suggestions of Wolf, simply because they were such lovers of Homeric poetry. I mean the poet Hölderlin and the philosopher Schelling. The views of Homer shared by these two friends from the theological school in Tübingen have much in common.

Hölderlin approached Homer, "the poet of poets," and his works with deep reverence and boundless love. Already in an early version of his novel *Hyperion*, Hölderlin brings his hero and his friends to a holy grotto consecrated to Homer, whose statue is in the center of it. They bring offerings to it and celebrate Homer in song. In these songs they sing of the return of all that has been lost, of the eternal community of the human spirit, and the reconciliation of all that has been separated. Homer, whose unity with nature has now been lost and shaken, will be regained through the purifying self-cleansing and perseverance of modern mankind. This triadic structure of Hölderlin's conception of history is the legacy of a secularized Christianity and was ultimately systematized by the third of the three Tübingen student-friends, Hegel.

Hölderlin's love for Homer, whom he always treated as an historical figure, was extended to love for his creation, Achilles. Hölderlin returned again and again in his novel, poems, and essays to one favorite scene in the *Iliad*. This is the meeting in the first book of Achilles with his divine mother, silver-footed Thetis, at the seashore in Troy. There we have Achilles' lament on his loss of honor and Thetis' consolation for the fate of mankind. This scene best serves as proof of the unified structure of the *Iliad* when one sees it in the following context. The action begins with Agamemnon's humiliation of Achilles. This motivates the wrath of Achilles, which is not assuaged until Book 24. His turning to his mother raises a purely human incident to the level of the gods, for Thetis resorts to Zeus, who thereby turns against the Greeks to favor the Trojan cause.

Hölderlin belonged without reservation to the Unitarians. For him the character Achilles is the center of the poem. This character, "so tough and tender," "so indescribably touching and then again a monster," he felt to be close to him in the way the hero of a sentimental novel of his own day might be.

Hölderlin once remarked in an essay: "People have wondered why Homer, who wanted to sing of the wrath of Achilles, scarcely allows him to appear in the poem." His solution was: "He was unwilling to profane the divine youth in the turmoil before Troy. The ideal must never appear as

routine. And he really could not sing of him more impressively and tenderly than by concealing him so that the few moments, when the poet allows him to appear before us, glorify him all the more because of his absence."¹⁵

Hölderlin drew up a whole series of essays on poetics. He planned to edit a periodical on the model of Schiller's *Horen*. This plan was not realized and for this reason they exist only as archival documents. In these reflections on poetry Hölderlin started again from Homer and Achilles. The essays (none of which exists in final form) seem to form a series. Hölderlin began with observations on Achilles. He proceeded to questions about characters suited for other literary genres. He continued to a typology of characters and went further to a typology of different methods to compose poetry. Throughout these essays he combines a dualistic system with a triadic one of epic, lyric, and drama. On this he superimposes a second triadic system of so-called *Töne*, tones. He calls these ideal, heroic, and naive. As a result of this complex structure, his essays grow increasingly incomprehensible both for the unprejudiced reader and the specialist. Whenever—and this is rarely—a preserved poem is mentioned in these essays, it is the *Iliad*. His point of orientation, therefore, remains Homer.

We learn that every poem has a basic tone (*Grundton*) and an artistic character (*Kunstcharakter*). That is to say: a true work of art possesses an interior tension. Whatever that might precisely mean is possibly made a bit clearer by the most important document for Homer in Hölderlin's *Nachlaß*. This is a letter of Hölderlin to a poet-friend, Casimir von Böhlendorff, dated 4 December 1801. This letter has become famous in Hölderlin studies. It was first published in 1905 and is one of the few pieces of evidence for a coherent and concise theory of poetry by this great lyric poet. The principle theme of the letter is the leitmotiv of the epoch: the dichotomy that exists between the exemplary character and the inimitability of the Greeks for the moderns.

Nothing is more difficult to learn than the free use of our inborn ability. And in my opinion, clarity of exposition is as much ours as heavenly fire belongs to the Greeks. Just because of this, they can be excelled in their passion for the beautiful rather than in that famous Homeric self-control and lucid description. It sounds paradoxical; but I state it again and offer it to you for criticism and use: that which really belongs to one will in the course of self-improvement become less and less of a priority. For this reason the Greeks are less masters of sacred pathos, just because it is part of their nature. Yet they are outstanding in lucid exposition from Homer onwards. This extraordinary man was inspired and profound enough to conquer for his Apollonine kingdom the Junoesque sobriety of the Occident. In this way he made the foreign his own. With us it is the opposite. For this reason it is dangerous to extract artistic rules

¹⁵ Hölderlin: *Sämtliche Werke*, Kleine Stuttgarter Ausgabe (= KSA), ed. by F. Beissner, IV (Stuttgart 1963) 235.

exclusively from Greek excellence. I have worked very hard on this and am convinced that apart from that which has to be the acme for the Greeks and us, namely that vital balance and dexterity, we are not permitted to be their equals. But what is one's own has to be so well learned as the alien. Precisely for that reason we cannot do without the Greeks. But we shall not equal them in that which is our own, because, as I said before, the unhampered use of one's own is what is most difficult.¹⁶

The terminology of this unusual document may appear overly subjective in details and therefore difficult to understand, but the tendency of this great thought is fully clear. Homer means for this interpreter of Greek poetry the historical place where the transformation from the world into poetry succeeded in an exemplary manner, in so far as it first attains concrete form. What he calls "heavenly fire" is the orgiastic inspiration that comes from God, which we ascribe to the Greeks. But that alone does not produce art. Only with the limitation and form imposed by sobriety in the shape of concrete works are great Greek art and poetry produced. It was Homer who first and best managed this, thinks Hölderlin, and when so considered he becomes a sort of messianic father of poetry. His person turns into a figure who forms human history, comparable only to Herakles, Moses, Sokrates, and Christ. Hölderlin's anticipation, one may add, of Nietzsche is obvious.

If Hölderlin was the one who detected in Homer a figure who created culture, Schelling was the one who at the same time designed a Homer for the future (*Philosophy of Art*, i.e. Lectures on Aesthetics held in Jena in 1802 and 1803, and repeated in Würzburg in 1804–05).¹⁷ This may sound odd but it corresponds to his friend's theory in the following way. Already in the nineties Schiller first in his famous review of the poems of Gottfried August Bürger (1791), then in the famous essays of the *Horen*-period made a categorical distinction between the present century of the Enlightenment and the time of Homer. He pinpointed the isolation and splintering of human activities and intellectual potential—today we would say all forms of estrangement symptomatic of the modern world—and drew the following conclusions:

A folk-poet, in the sense that Homer or the troubadours were to their time, would be sought in vain today. Our world is no longer the Homeric, where all members of society shared more or less the same emotions and opinions. There they could recognize themselves easily in a poetry shared by them all.¹⁸

Here we have the point of departure for the passionate young philosopher Schelling. Schiller too had indicated the medium which might help to overcome modern self-estrangement. He believed firmly that "poetry

¹⁶ KSA VI. 456.

¹⁷ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* (1859; repr. Darmstadt 1966).

¹⁸ *Schillers Werke*, Nationalausgabe XXII: *Vermischte Schriften*, ed. by H. Meyer (Weimar 1958) 245 f.

almost alone is capable of mending the split forces of our mind. Poetry has a harmonious concern for head and heart, for reason and imagination. Poetry restores the whole man in us." But how can it achieve this enormous reconciliation? By penetrating and integrating all the achievements of modern times, that means the insights of science, the political, moral, and practical experience of the epoch; by purifying them and, in the lofty words of Schiller, "by creating from an edifying art a model for the era out of the era." He thus paved the way for the consideration of Homer and his paradigmatic relevance to Schiller's own time. For if one observes the abyss which exists between Homer and the present with all its crass diversification and diffusion, it is understandable that the desire to see again the lost harmony of a divided world regained would result in a blessed future state of mankind. This Schelling called "Homeric." This vision of the progress of history did not necessarily require a person, that is a universal poet as the crown of the times; rather the new epoch itself he calls "the last Homer."

He had earlier prepared the way for this new mythology in the so-called "First Systematic Program" (1796). Although the ideas were Schelling's, this paper has survived in the handwriting of Hegel. In this paper he describes a poetry that surpasses all reason and he expresses his conviction that "the highest act of reason in which all ideas are encompassed will be an act of artistic imagination." Poetry will be in the end what it was at the beginning: the teacher of mankind. Although Homer is not named in this paper, Homer is certainly implied. For the Greeks Homer was precisely "the teacher of mankind." This leads us again to Schelling's major work, *The Philosophy of Art*. There he postulates a new mythology that will re-establish Homeric naivete and totality in a post-scientific era of mankind. This "new mythology" is intended to reconcile the ancient gods of nature with the historical gods of Christianity. Mythology finds its vehicle in epic. That is why Schelling speaks of a future epic and he ends up—to make an overly long story short—with the confident hope that "the Epic, that is Homer (in the etymological sense of the word the unifying one), who then was first, will now be last and will consummate the whole destiny of modern art."¹⁹

Obviously what I have been describing are the extremes of romantic speculation. Yet Schelling was by no means the only one to propound such theories. We find comparable ideas in the old Herder and even in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics. We might also, in conclusion, mention the last of the German Homer-enthusiasts, who died a hundred years ago and who exerted considerable impact on our view of Homer. I mean Heinrich Schliemann, whose literal, almost fundamentalist, belief in the text of Homer led him to the excavation of Troy and Mycenae.

¹⁹ Schelling (above, note 17) 457.

We began with the sceptic and anti-philologist Friedrich Nietzsche. It was he, so far as I understand, who brought to an end that German passion for Homer, some examples of which we have discussed. He did so by reprimanding the exaggerated, otherworldly German infatuation with the Greeks. All this occurred during the 1870's. Schliemann at the same time brought to the light of day the sacred walls of Troy, which thereby lost their mystery. The German idealization of Homer could not survive these two violent onslaughts.²⁰

Freie Universität Berlin

²⁰ An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the First Oldfather Lecture in the Department of the Classics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on 27 March 1990. I thank my friend, Professor William M. Calder III, who beneficially read the typescript and to whom I owe the English translation, and the editor of *Illinois Classical Studies*, Professor Miroslav Marcovich, who kindly agreed to publish this paper here.

