



Homer between East and West

There has been a growing trend in Homeric studies to investigate the connections between Homeric epic and the so-called ‘Ancient Near East’. In this paper I reflect on the nature of this trend. What is at stake in reading a ‘Near Eastern’ Homer in the current political and cultural climate? Why are so many scholars of Homer turning to neighbouring disciplines? What new insights are we hoping to gain and what old certainties are we (not) prepared to give up? My argument is in three parts. In a first section, I briefly revisit the so-called ‘Troy debate’ in the German media, a high-profile row over the nature of the city that was excavated by the late Manfred Korfmann. I argue that the row had little to do with ancient realities and everything with the cultural and political climate in post-unification Germany. I then turn to the study of Near Eastern motifs in the Homeric epics as pioneered by Walter Burkert and Martin West. Once again, I suggest that we are witnessing not so much the disinterested ‘discovery’ of new facts, but a complicated and in many ways contradictory process of fashioning a new image of Homer, partly at least in response to a gradual change in the political and cultural climate. In the third and final section of my paper I address some of the issues raised by my earlier discussion. I ask whether there might be a way of reading Homer which emphasises continuity between East and West; and if so, what this might mean for the future of Homeric scholarship.

Between Turkey and Germany

In his recent book entitled ‘Troy and Homer’,¹ Joachim Latacz sets out to show that the Trojan War as described by Homer may well have happened and that the city of Troy, as Homer describes it, certainly existed. Latacz’s argument draws heavily on recent research in neighbouring disciplines: Hittite kings of the late Bronze Age were in contact with the kings of Ahhijawā (Achaean lands); acted as allies of the rulers of Wilusa (Ilios/Troy); and contended for rule over Millawa(n)da (Miletus). The result, according to Latacz, is (or soon will be) that

¹ Latacz (2004).

“Homer is to be taken seriously”,² in the sense that major events mentioned in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* ought henceforth to be treated as historical fact.

There are of course different ways of ‘taking Homer seriously’, and one may wonder whether Latacz’s is the most appropriate or illuminating in absolute terms. What cannot be doubted is the fact that he hit a nerve with contemporary readers of Homer, especially in Germany. A recent exhibition on the subject of Troy through the ages attracted over 800.000 visitors in three German cities. The exhibition was organized by Manfred Korfmann, a friend and close collaborator of Latacz, who, until his untimely death earlier this year, conducted fresh excavations on the hill of Hisarlik.³ Korfmann’s aim with his exhibition was to combine the ‘dream’ of Troy, as propagated by artists and poets from Homer onward, with the ‘reality’ of the Hittite principality of Wilusa, a Bronze Age centre of trade at the crossroads between Europe and Anatolia. As well as galvanizing the German public, Korfmann’s exhibition sparked a protracted and acrimonious row among German classicists: was Troy a centre of commerce or merely a minor trading port? Was it a city or a town? And how did Korfmann’s findings relate to the poetry of Homer? Unusually for German classics, the disagreement did not remain behind closed doors. By the summer of 2001 the debate over what Troy ‘really’ was, and how Homer’s depiction of Troy related to the settlement which Korfmann was excavating on and around the Hill of Hisarlik in modern Turkey, escalated into something approaching a collective cultural hysteria, fuelled in part by anxieties over the nature of the recently unified German state, the status of minorities within it (especially the large Turkish minority), and the place of Germany in a wider post-modern world. For educated Germans, Korfmann’s Troy functioned as a complex symbol of the new society they were hoping to build: multicultural rather than exclusively Western, market-oriented rather than bureaucratic (Troy as a centre of commerce), collaborative rather than authoritarian.⁴ The very nature of Korfmann’s excavations was suggestive of a new kind of social contract: his team consisted – and continues to consist – of experts from many different countries, and much of his money came from private funds. The same is of course true of most other large-scale archaeological campaigns, but rarely are these aspects of the discipline mythologised to quite the same extent: against the backdrop of the ‘old’ model of cultural conquest embodied by Schliemann, Korfmann’s new campaign of discovering Troy took on the status of a founding myth for post-unification Germany. The patronage of the Turkish state, it should be added, was proudly flagged in the exhibition catalogue.

As I have pointed out, Korfmann liked to describe Troy/Wilusa as situated between East and West. As has often been remarked, this has obvious implications for Turkey’s ambition to join

² Latacz (2004) 287.

³ Published in the annual reports *Studia Troica*.

⁴ For this and the following see Haubold (2002a).

the European Union. However, it also has consequences for the study and reception of Homeric poetry. By the late 20th century, Homer had long been regarded as a founding figure of Western literature and culture. Homer was ‘the first (Western) poet’, the first to create literature out of mere myth, the first truly humane thinker. The work of Korfmann and Latacz has the potential of subverting this idea of Homer as the father of Europe, though in practice it does nothing of the sort: both Latacz and Korfmann firmly believe in Homer as the first Western poet. A similar tension pervades the work of Walter Burkert and Martin West.⁵ Unlike Korfmann and Latacz, Burkert and West do not aim to discover ‘the truth’ behind the *Iliad*. Nor is their work as obviously informed by a specific set of cultural and political circumstances (post-unification Germany, enlargement of the European Union). However, they too respond to a simmering unease with the outmoded cultural myth of ‘European Homer’; and like Korfmann and Latacz, they respond to it by locating Homeric poetry, and Greek literature more generally, on the cusp between East and West.

Between East and West

Ever since the discovery and decipherment of major Akkadian and Hittite texts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there has been a growing body of scholarship which studies the similarities between Greek and non-Greek literatures in the ancient Mediterranean. Much of this work focuses on epic. Scholars have collected words, passages and entire narratives which reminded them of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry. Ugaritic Baal ‘who rides upon the clouds’ brought to mind Zeus, the ‘gatherer of clouds’.⁶ The Sumero-Akkadian *Descent of Ishtar* read like a version of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.⁷ Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature seemed to anticipate the *Works and Days*.⁸ Such was the excitement generated by the new discoveries that few scholars stopped to consider what exactly it was that they had found. All too often, parallels were left to ‘speak for themselves’, a phrase actually used by West.⁹ In the event, they did not always do so. Those readers keen to know what difference the new research might make to their appreciation of early Greek epic were often disappointed. Thus, Stephen Halliwell writes in his review of Martin West’s *East Face of Helicon*:

It is surely surprising that West never broaches the issue of how, if at all, his material might affect our interpretation of Greek culture.¹⁰

⁵ Burkert (1992), West (1997).

⁶ Morris (1997) 617; West (1997) 115, with further parallels.

⁷ Penglase (1994) ch. 6.

⁸ West (1978) 28.

⁹ West (1997) viii.

¹⁰ Halliwell (1998) 235.

Halliwell's complaint is not entirely unjustified. To this day, the quest for non-Greek sources has yielded plenty of material but little by way of a theoretically informed debate. Why should it matter if Achilles and Patroclus have their counterpart in Gilgamesh and Enkidu? Why do we need to know that the gods in *Atrahasis* cast lots just as they do in *Iliad* XV? One answer to these questions might be that non-Greek parallels help us deconstruct the myth of Greek epic, and Homer in particular, as the origin of 'Western literature'. The idea that Homer marks an absolute beginning is memorably formulated by Jasper Griffin:

The two great epics which go under the name of Homer bring European literature into existence with a bang.¹¹

Homer as the 'Big Bang' of European literature accounts for everything that follows, while blotting out anything that may have gone before. It was this idea of an absolute beginning that scholars increasingly challenged in the wake of Burkert's and West's magisterial works. As Barry Powell observes:

Homer's poems are regarded as the *fons et origo* of Western culture... Many are surprised that the basic stories of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are not Greek in origin.¹²

The hope to 'surprise' readers by de-westernising 'the basic stories' of Homer has been a driving force behind much recent research on early Greek epic. It is important to realise what this entails and what it does not entail. Scholars like Powell do make a point of going back behind Homer, but they do not challenge Griffin's emphasis on discontinuity between the Homeric text and the earlier 'stories' on which it draws. Quite the contrary is true: most – though not all – recent research has used Near Eastern material precisely to illustrate the unique achievement of Homer. This approach can take a number of different forms. Griffin himself saw the decisive change as one in 'atmosphere':

Motifs and conceptions which are at home in related or adjacent literatures must undergo a characteristic transformation, to become adapted to the unique atmosphere of the Homeric poems. By such comparisons it is possible to gain an insight into that atmosphere.¹³

The similarities between Near Eastern literatures and Homeric poetry show just how dissimilar they really are. Powell undertakes to put this view on a more scientific footing. He links the superior qualities of Homer to the invention of the Greek alphabet:

¹¹ Griffin (1987) vi.

¹² Powell (2004) 45.

¹³ Griffin (1980) xv.

There is never clarity about mood, tense, or aspect in West Semitic writing, and the distance between the actual sound of speech and information encoded in the writing remains very great. The oblique narrative descriptions in familiar English versions of the Hebrew Bible, when compared with Homer's vivid descriptions, or the tragedians', reflect the inability of West Semitic writing to come close to natural language.¹⁴

Powell goes on to ascribe to the Greek alphabet the power of "enabling highly refined forms of thought"; and then suggests that the alphabet was in fact invented so as to record the Homeric epics. Homeric poetry is thus superior to the Bible and other Levantine texts by virtue of the very script that was used to record it. By implication, Homer also compares favourably to the Babylonian poems written in cuneiform, a script that, according to Powell, renders human thought "simpler than thought common in speech",¹⁵ and thus makes it incapable of expressing "novel thoughts".¹⁶

Sarah Morris offers yet another way in which Near Eastern texts can be used to emphasise the uniqueness of Homer:

In their final form, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are harvested from a rich heritage of stories long alive in the Bronze Age and in the Near East, reconstituted into an epic tradition of uniquely Greek heroic dimensions.¹⁷

Like Powell, Morris surprises her readers merely to reassure them that the difference between Greek epic and non-Greek literature is what really matters: Homer did inherit from the East, but "reconstituted" what he took from elsewhere in a unique way. This time, the decisive criterion is not literary atmosphere or vividness born of alphabetic writing, but what Morris calls the 'heroic dimensions' of Greek epic. This is an interesting proposition which deserves to be examined in some more detail.

The term 'hero' has long been associated with the superior qualities of Homeric poetry. Griffin, for example, uses it in his famous attempt to defend the superior standing of the *Iliad* within the Greek epic tradition:

The strict, radical, and consistently heroic interpretation of the world presented by the *Iliad* made it quite different from the Cycle, still content with monsters, miracles,

¹⁴ Powell (1997) 11.

¹⁵ Powell (1997) 6.

¹⁶ Powell (1997) 7.

¹⁷ Morris (1997) 599.

metamorphoses, and an un-tragic attitude towards mortality, all seasoned with exoticism and romance, and composed in a flatter, looser, less dramatic style.¹⁸

It is not my aim here to assess the validity of Griffin's judgement. What interests me is the way in which he contrasts the "consistently heroic interpretation" of the *Iliad* with an earlier tradition that is "still content with monsters, miracles, metamorphoses" and lacks the *Iliad*'s tragic outlook on life. The suggestion here is that 'heroic' equals 'more advanced'; and that the achievement of a consistently heroic vision (as opposed to an intermittently heroic one?) marks a decisive stage in the development of human literature and civilization. If we now ask what exactly Griffin means by 'heroic', it appears from the contrast he draws with 'monsters, miracles' and 'metamorphoses' that he has in mind human beings who take decisions and act of their own free will very much like ourselves. Homer is superior because his characters are less "exotic" [sic] than those of the Cyclic poets. And that means, in turn, that they inhabit a world which is, if not fully secularised, then certainly dominated by human planning and human thought. Griffin's position may seem extreme, but he does in fact express a widely held view. Thus, James Redfield writes towards the end of his influential analysis of Homeric heroism:

The *Iliad*, although 'pervaded from end to end by an elaborate polytheism', is in virtue of the characteristic ambiguities of its elaboration a founding document of Greek secularism, of science and philosophy.¹⁹

Redfield is not concerned to draw a distinction between Homer and non-Greek narrative poetry, but such a distinction is strongly suggested by his view of the *Iliad* as a "founding document of Greek secularism". If we combine Redfield's view of Homeric secularism with Morris' view of the "uniquely heroic dimensions" of the Greek epic tradition we may begin to understand why the invention of the secular Western self as a heroic self is today so firmly associated with the poetry of Homer. In this sense too, his texts set the standards which earlier 'Eastern' authors – a few exceptions notwithstanding – cannot hope to match.

A shared tradition

So far, I have argued that the idea of Homer as a bridge between East and West responds to a genuine need for reconfiguring the origins of Western literature and culture. I have also suggested that current scholarship tends to adduce Near Eastern material defensively, in order to invest Homer with unique qualities, be it in terms of 'atmosphere', 'vividness', or 'heroic' outlook. This last point is of particular interest, for it suggests that what is at stake in the

¹⁸ Griffin (1977) 53.

¹⁹ Redfield (1994) 247.

debates over an 'Eastern' Homer is not just short-term political and cultural change, but rather the much more fundamental problem of how to articulate the Western self as a secular self. It would be fascinating to see when and where the idea of Western secular heroism surfaces in current debates about Eastern religious fundamentalism; and what role, if any, the Homeric poems play in this context. Rather than pursuing this line of enquiry any further, I propose to embark on a thought experiment: what would happen if we placed less emphasis on Homer's uniqueness? Is there scope for discovering genuine common ground between Greek epic poetry and neighbouring traditions? If so, to what extent would this oblige us to rethink current assumptions about the nature of Greek epic?

My starting point is the question of how we conceptualise influence at all in the context of the ancient Mediterranean. As I have pointed out already, Eastern elements in Homer are often explained as imports from a different cultural sphere. The dominant model is the reception of Greek literature by Latin poets. The following extract is taken from Simon Pulleyn's recent commentary on *Iliad* I:

Just as Latinists have traditionally looked to Greece in order to understand the origin of various literary genres and themes, so now Hellenists gain a fuller appreciation of the background of epic if they understand something of Near Eastern languages and cultures.²⁰

Pulleyn is by no means alone in comparing the 'reception' of non-Greek material by Greek epic with that of Greek material by Roman authors. Not uncharacteristically, he introduces it as perfectly natural, although it does in fact beg a number of obvious questions. As Glenn Most has recently pointed out, Greek and Latin authors adopt very different attitudes towards the texts of other cultures.²¹ Roman authors started imitating Greek texts and adopting Greek literary habits from at least the 3rd century BCE onward. Epic poets in particular – Ennius and Virgil among others – engaged in a conscious game of allusion, forever adopting and transmuting Greek literary habits. That this was so was well understood by their contemporaries and was indeed an important part of their enjoyment as readers. Imitation of Greek texts is not accidental to Latin epic but the necessary corollary of a poetics of allusion (*imitatio*). It is therefore entirely appropriate that Latin commentators spend much time discussing Greek models of Latin epic, carefully pointing out the ways in which those models have been employed in each case. We look in vain for similar discussions in the surviving commentaries on Greek epic. The Homeric scholia, for example, are silent about possible connections with non-Greek texts. Even such glaring parallels as the famous simile of the grieving lion in *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* go without comment.²² One gets the impression that

²⁰ Pulleyn (2000) 13.

²¹ Most (2003).

²² *Gilgamesh* VIII.61-2 and *Iliad* XVIII.318-22.

Greek readers of all times either did not know of these parallels or did not care about them. To quote from Glenn Most's discussion of this phenomenon:

The similarities between the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*, and between the *Theogony*, the Babylonian *Enūma eliš*, and the Hittite-Hurrian myth of Kumarbi, are evident, and fascinating, for us: they were quite unknown, and of no interest whatsoever, to the Greeks.²³

Most's observation raises an obvious question: if the Greeks themselves were uninterested in the literatures of their neighbours, why should we be?

Perhaps an answer might emerge if we focus on that aspect of Homeric poetry which Redfield encourages us to ignore when claiming the *Iliad* as "a founding document of Greek secularism": the gods.²⁴ By common consent, the depiction of the gods is the single area where Homer comes closest to neighbouring narrative traditions. Sarah Morris has remarked with reference to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that "it is the gods and their interaction with mortals which are highly Oriental".²⁵ Much the same argument could be made for Hesiod. The notion of a divine family with a history, a shared abode and a hierarchical structure with Zeus at its head all point eastwards. The question arises of how we account for this phenomenon. So far, scholars active in the field have tended to interpret the apparent light-heartedness of Homer's gods as a sign that they represented little more than literary embellishments, perhaps borrowed from Eastern sources for orientalisising effect.²⁶ This position is not tenable. For a start, the relatively 'serious' gods of Hesiod's *Theogony* are as 'oriental' as the laughing and feasting deities familiar from the *Iliad*. More generally, the gods of epic are clearly the same figures that historical Greeks worshipped in cult. Philosophers like Xenophanes did of course criticise Homer and Hesiod for depicting the gods in an immoral way,²⁷ but in so doing they too assumed that the gods of epic *ought to be* faithful representations of the ones they worshipped.

There is another reason why we should not think of Homer's and Hesiod's gods as the oriental icing on the cake of an otherwise Greek epic narrative. Unlike the glamorous Levantine artefacts mentioned elsewhere in Homer, the gods are of central importance to epic as a genre. From the Hesiodic *Theogony* down to the major heroic poems and the *Works and Days* the Muses

²³ Most (2003) 385. Penglase (1994) 237-8 suggests that Greek audiences did have an intimate knowledge of at least some Mesopotamian 'myths', but his argument fails to convince.

²⁴ Redfield (1994) 247.

²⁵ Morris (1997) 616.

²⁶ Thus, West (1997) discusses the gods under the heading 'Divine Comedy'.

²⁷ Xenophanes fr. 11 (DK).

of Homer and Hesiod recall how Olympus was made, how the gods rose to power, and how they cemented their power by decreeing the end of the heroes and bringing on the current world order. The oriental looks of Homer's gods cannot be explained away as mere fashion. They are an integral part of how epic as a genre defines itself.

The time has come to ask some fairly fundamental questions about what the Greeks thought epic was. We have seen what it was not: a clever game of imitation and cross-cultural appropriation. Ancient Greek audiences of epic simply did not want to know that a bard had introduced some very special idea of his own, nor were they interested in the artistic dexterity that went into appropriating a particular Near Eastern source, if that is what the bards did. To a certain extent, they enjoyed the glamour of oriental objects and narrative techniques, but above all they valued, and got their enjoyment (*terpsis*) from, detailed and vivid accounts of what had happened in the distant past (*klea andrōn*).²⁸ They relied on the Muses to tell them the truth about past events (*alētheia, etyma, etētyma*). They abhorred falsehoods (*pseudea*), which they associated with a lack of narrative shape (*morphē*).²⁹ The genre's emphasis on the truthfulness, fullness and 'orderliness' (*kosmos*) of its account is explained by its contents – the history of the divine cosmos – and in turn explains its adherence to the time-honoured patterns of thought and expression which modern scholars call its 'traditional style'.³⁰ Nowhere is this more obviously important than when it comes to describing the gods. Zeus was the 'gatherer of clouds' for very good reasons. Everyone knew that it was he who ruled the heavens and wielded the thunderbolt. It could not be otherwise, no less than the stability of the universe depended upon it. Every time that Greek epic employs the epithet 'gatherer of clouds' it pays tribute to Zeus and the unalterable order of the world over which he presides. Now, Zeus and his fellow gods are among the most central features of Greek culture, but they are not contained within its confines (however understood). Like everyone else in the ancient Mediterranean, the Greeks conceived of their gods as universal forces. Zeus ruled the entire world, not just Greece. Poseidon caused earthquakes all over, not just in Greece. More generally, what Herodotus calls the Greeks' 'theogony' had to account for the making of the entire world, not just Greece.³¹ This is immediately obvious when we look at Hesiod's *Theogony*, a poem which describes the origins of the universe. Yet, similar claims to universal status are implied in Homer too. Modern scholars have often called Homeric epic pan-Hellenic in orientation, by which they mean that it addresses the whole of Greece.³² But beyond its ambition to speak to all Greeks it also conveys a more universal message. As representatives of

²⁸ For this definition of epic see Ford (1992) and (1997).

²⁹ For the 'shape(liness)', *morphē*, of the epic account see Graziosi and Haubold (2005) 47-8.

³⁰ Graziosi and Haubold (2005) ch. 2.

³¹ Herodotus 2.53.

³² E.g. Nagy (1999).

the most important forces in Homer's universe, the gods are not culturally specific: in fact, we often see them travel to the ends of the earth. Nor is the relationship between gods and men, which lies at the heart of all epic poetry, configured as a specifically Greek (or Achaean) matter. In some contexts, the Greeks did of course insist that their religion and culture differed from those of other peoples, but not in epic. The Achaeans of the *Iliad* worship the same gods and adhere to much the same values as their Trojan enemies.³³ Even the distant Ethiopians venerate not some local deity (as Xenophanes would have it) but Poseidon, Zeus and the other Olympians. There is no developed sense of local religion in early Greek epic. What is more, the poetry of Homer (and Hesiod) almost entirely elides differences in language and culture among diverse human communities.³⁴ This is not simply a convenient poetic conceit, nor does it reflect a 'primitive' outlook. Rather, it suggests that differences between human cultures are of secondary importance when we consider the order of the world at large. What matters in epic are the immortal gods in heaven and their counterparts, the mortals who walk on earth.

When Greeks wanted to know 'what life was like' in the very general sense of how the world was structured and what should be man's place in it, they naturally turned to Homer and Hesiod. At one level, epic was thus a specifically Greek phenomenon: we have little evidence that it was read by non-Greeks before the Hellenistic period.³⁵ However, Homer and Hesiod did have to be international in the sense that they aimed to account for the entire world, from one shore of the ocean to the other. Conceptually, the issues addressed in epic – the relationship between gods and human beings – are universal. The gods rule everywhere. Mortals are more localised, but the separation between the mortal and divine spheres concerns us all.

Cosmogonic traditions throughout the ancient Mediterranean made the world comprehensible beyond the limits of any specific culture or religion. In terms of poetic practice, we see a convergence between individual traditions on the subject of the gods. This is necessarily so: human beings are not simply free to describe the gods and the history of the universe as they please. Any given account must be true; and in this case truth demands a shared tradition. This point is difficult to grasp from a modern perspective: we are all well acquainted with religious traditions that declare their own truth at the expense of other people's false gods. But this – bar some exceptions – was not the practice in the ancient Mediterranean; and it is certainly not the case in Greek epic.

The point can be illustrated with a passage from the *Odyssey*. In book 2 of the poem, Telemachus visits Pylus in search for news of his father. Telemachus is particularly close to

³³ Hall (1989). Her position has been modified but not superseded.

³⁴ Societies that are radically different in cultural terms also tend to fall into different ontological categories. The Cyclopes, for example, are not *anthrōpoi* and thus not fully human.

³⁵ We do have some: see Haubold (2004) for Persian appropriations of epic.

Athena and her father Zeus, but when he arrives in Pylus, he finds his host Nestor making sacrifice to Poseidon. A potential crisis looms: should Poseidon turn out to support a radically different world order from Zeus and Athena – as indeed he does in book 9 of the *Odyssey* – Telemachus would be in serious difficulties. For a sustainable relationship to be established between him and his hosts, his own patron gods must therefore be shown to be compatible with Poseidon as the patron of Nestor. This is achieved when Pisistratus invites the visitors to pray to Poseidon:

My guest, make your prayer now to the lord Poseidon,
for his is the festival you have come to on your arrival;
but when you have poured to him and prayed, according to custom,
then give this man also a cup of the sweet wine, so that
he too can pour, for I think that he also will make his prayer
to the immortals. All humans need the gods.³⁶

In order to know who someone is, at the most fundamental level, we need to know whether they too are human. And that question is bound up with the more specific one whether they, like other human beings, respect the gods. In Pylus, those who worship Athena and those who worship Poseidon unproblematically share a global vision of who the gods are and how we as humans relate to them. Things are not always so harmonious – we may only think of the savage Polyphemus; but throughout Homeric epic there is an expectation that *anthrōpoi*, ‘human beings’, of all cultures inhabit fundamentally the same divinely ordered universe.

Conclusion

I started this paper with an apparent paradox: current research on Homer’s sources is clearly aimed at redefining the roots of Western literature. However, as well as opening up new perspectives, scholars have also emphasised the difference between Homer and everything that happened before or elsewhere. As often in the history of classical scholarship, Homer acts as the vessel into which all myths of cultural origins flow: literature, the alphabet, Western secularism. ‘Eastern’ literature is left as a foil to the unique achievement of the ‘Western’ master poet, its assorted ‘stories’ giving way to the fully formed heroic art of epic. In response to this situation, I asked what happens if we place cultural value on what is *not* uniquely Homeric. The gods of epic are universal in conception, as is the human condition which they help to define. It is not surprising to find in early Greek epic the same fundamental grammar of cosmogonic thought that we see in neighbouring traditions. This does not of course exclude

³⁶ *Odyssey* 3.43-8.

the possibility that different ideas and motifs may also have travelled between ancient cultures for different reasons. I simply suggest that Homeric epic may have been international in conception as well as in 'fact'. There are reasons for the parallels: they do not just "speak for themselves".

At this point, it may be useful to recall a more general point that was made by Ken Dowden in his review of Martin West's *East Face of Helicon*: the relationship between Greece and the Near East, according to Dowden, necessarily raises questions "about how one conceives Classics at all."³⁷ Recent research on Homer is a case in point. Attempts to uncover Homer's Eastern roots are invariably implicated in larger questions of how 'the classical past' speaks to us, how we make it 'relevant' and at what cost. Salvatore Settis has recently grappled with some of these questions on an appropriately ambitious scale.³⁸ Starting with Mullah Omar's comparison of the United States to the Cyclops blinded by an enemy it could not name,³⁹ he asks in what sense Homer is still 'ours', and then proceeds to outline the following vision of the classical past:

The essence of the classical emerges from cultural mixture and exchange ... These in turn are inextricably linked with the 'rhythmic form' of its continuous rebirth.⁴⁰

Settis does not pursue the question of Homer's place between East and West, though he may have found it useful. For here, it seems to me, we have a fundamental test case for his intuition that the classical past, as conceived in the 21st century, needs to be understood primarily in a dialogue across cultural boundaries.

³⁷ Dowden (2001) 167; see also Haubold (2002b).

³⁸ Settis (2004).

³⁹ Settis (2004) 6.

⁴⁰ Settis (2004) 113; translation my own.

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