

Aria

I L I A D

DAVID DENBY IN GREAT BOOKS ON
HIS READING OF I L I A D

I had forgotten. I had forgotten the extremity of its cruelty and tenderness, and, reading it now, turning the Iliad open anywhere in its 15,693 lines, I was shocked. A dying word, "shocked." Few people have been able to use it well since Claude Rains so famously said, "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here," as he pocketed his winnings in Casablanca. But it's the only word for excitement and alarm of this intensity. The brute vitality of the air, the magnificence of ships, wind, and fires; the raging battles, the plains charged with terrified horses, the beasts unstrung and falling; the warriors flung facedown in the dust; the ravaged longing for home and family and meadows and the rituals of peace, leading at last to an instant of reconciliation, when even two men who are bitter enemies fall into rapt admiration of each other's nobility and beauty—it is a war poem, and in the Richmond Lattimore translation it has an excruciating vividness, an obsessive observation of horror that causes almost disbelief.

Idomeneus stabbed at the middle of his chest with the spear, and broke the bronze armour about him which in time before had guarded his body from destruction. He cried out then, a great cry, broken, the spear in him, and fell, thunderously, and the spear in his heart was stuck fast but the heart was panting still and beating to shake the butt end of the spear.

If I had seen that quaking spear in a shopping-mall scare movie, I would have abandoned the sticky floors and headed for the door. Exploitation and dehumanization! Teenagers never read anything—that's why they love this grisly movie trash! Yet here is the image at the beginning of Western literature, and in its most famous book.

The quivering spear was hair-raising, though there were even more frightening images: eyeballs spitted on the ends of spears and held aloft in triumph, a blade entering at the mouth "so that the brazen spearhead smashed its way clean through below the brain in an upward stroke, and the white bones splintered." Homer records these mutilations with an apparent physical relish that suddenly gives way to bitter sorrow (this is one way the images differ from those in horror movies) and to a yearning for ordinary life, a caress of nostalgia slipped into the mesmerizing catastrophe before us. The exultant violence is shot through with the most profound

dismay. The Greeks, camped outside the walls of Troy, are far from home, but home, and everything lovely, proper, and comforting that might happen there, is evoked in heart-breaking flashes. There is the case of

Simoeisios in his stripling's beauty, whom once his mother descending from Ida bore beside the banks of Simoeis when she had followed her father and mother to tend the sheepflocks.

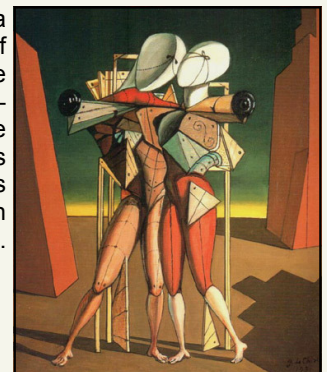
Therefore they called him Simoeisios; but he could not render again the care of his dear parents; he was short-lived, beaten down beneath the spear of high-hearted Aias, who struck him as he first came forward beside the nipple of the right breast, and the bronze spearhead drove clean through the shoulder. He dropped then to the ground in the dust, like some black poplar . . . (IV, 472-82)

The nipple of the *right* breast. Homer in his terrifying exactness tells us where the spear comes in and goes out, what limbs are severed; he tells us that the dead will not return to rich soil, they will not take care of elderly parents, receive pleasure from their young wives. His explicitness has a finality beyond all illusion. In the end, the war (promoted by the gods) will consume almost all of them, Greeks and Trojans alike, sweeping on year after year, in battle

after battle—a mystery in its irresistible momentum, its profoundly absorbing moment-to-moment activity and overall meaninglessness. First one side drives forward, annihilates hundreds, and is on the edge of victory. Then, a few days later, inspired by some god's trick or phantasm—a prod to the sluggish brain of an exhausted warrior—the other side recovers, advances, and carries all before it. When the poem opens, this movement back and forth has been going on for more than nine years.



(XIII, 438-44)



Giorgio de Chirico,
Hector and Andromache