

My Homer

I often say that I was born in 1944 but raised in the 15th century because although I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, in a New England factory town, in post–World War II, I grew up in a large southern Italian family where the rules were absolute, and customs antiquated. My sister and I were doing the jitterbug to Chuck Berry’s “Maybelline” coming from the radio on the kitchen counter, my father was singing Nat King Cole songs in the shower and my grandfather was singing “*Vicin’ u mare,*” and “*Non sona più la sveglia*” under the grape arbor.

My grandparents were all born and raised in two tiny paesi, Tolve and Avigliano, in Basilicata, the backwater of a backwater. Naples is “the North” to us. Roughly old Lucania, Basilicata is composed of steep parallel mountains precluding easy communications, making it one of the least known parts of Italy. Even Calabria, to our south, the famously backward toe of our famous boot, is better known. Sicilians have the wild pride of their stunning and infamous island. But if you are *Lucano* [*Lucano*, It.] you are from a place that even other Italians barely know. “*Abash,*” my grandmother said when I asked her what she thought of the Tolvesi, her people. Real low, said this southern Italian woman who was filled with pride of blood, pride of self, pride of her American prosperity. It is still one of the poorest regions in Italy. There is little tourism, less industry, a place more deeply connected to the past than the present.

Is this why layers of the great ancient cultures that swept through Sicily and Southern Italy have been preserved? The Greeks were powerfully present in this part of the world beginning in the seventh century BCE. Though all the ancient Mediterranean cultures left their

imprint in the region, the deposits of Greek colonization are among the most richly apparent. Just to point out two strikingly obvious remnants: throughout the south of Italy and Sicily, there are the stunningly beautiful Greek temples, as well as the countless regional museums crammed with statues of Greek deities, so voluminous that they are literally stuffed into cabinets, in room after room, museum after museum, without note or comment. There are simply too many of them to catalog. The Greek colonial world seems more richly inscribed than any of the other ancient empires. What I am exploring here is perhaps a subtler layer, remnant of that Greek “new world,” one inscribed in cultural mores and oral traditions. Though subtle, they were, and are, so strongly a part of my people as to have successfully survived up to, and right alongside, the intense transforming forces of post–World War II America. My grandparents carried with them an ancient world preserved as if in simple, breathing amber, and passed it onto us, not as a relic but as our everyday lived reality.

The archaic ways with which I was raised were so natural as to be effortless. Absolute tribal cultures keep you busy. There are a lot of rules to keep. We were so preoccupied with making sure we lived according to the absolute customs of our family, that we never questioned them.

But once I left my sealed Italian existence, and went out into the modern urban world, I found myself at the doorway to the 1960s. Even though I was of the second generation, born in America, I had so little ability to reconcile the southern Italian immigrant life I had come from with the one I moved to, that I found myself mute. But the word mute isn’t quite accurate. I was so literally stunned, “out of it,” “out of tune,” *stunmada*, that I had ability neither to form thought nor to find a language with which to describe this switch. So, for many years, I lived in two irreconcilable loci.

Only long after I left Waterbury, did I begin to understand the distance between these cultures and only fairly recently, some forty-five years later, have I discovered a perspective to help me understand why these two places are so irreconcilable. There is a single author who acts as a useful guide to the land and tribe whence I came. Homer and his epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are my guidebooks. At first, I thought it humorous that there were so many particulars I recognized at once in his epics, but gradually I began to appreciate that Homer wasn’t telling us about a mythical, distant people, but rather stories about a tribe like mine.

One of the major functions of myth is to embody and teach the values of a culture. In its stories are embedded the culture’s codes of behavior. In Homer I found a means of understanding why the eighty-

nine-mile journey from New York to Waterbury actually represented a span of millennia. Homer's archaic terrain is as familiar to me as the Formica table in my mother's kitchen.

So in reality, it makes more sense to say I was born in 1944 but raised in Homer's time. It was the 15th century, but 15th century BCE! Although during my childhood, life in America would soon be closing in on the posthistorical, second half of the 20th century, much of what formed the paradigms of our family life had to do with pre-Christian, prehistorical ideas of pride and honor, shame and hospitality, of singing and storytelling, the palpable reality of dreams, and a strict code of what it meant to be a man and a woman. What was emphasized was shame not anxiety, honor not accomplishment, hospitality rather than individual ambition, song and storytelling, not writing.

This psychogeography will be familiar to other Sicilian and southern Italian Americans. Even the basic Homeric concepts were at the heart of the ethos in which we were raised. We watched our parents, grandparents, even those of us not born in Italy, experience a lifelong preoccupation with *nostos*, or the longing for home or return, which lies at the heart of *The Odyssey* and the immigrant experience. There is the idea of *nekyia*, the calling up of ghosts or the dead, as well as all the stuff of daily life in a southern Italian family. There are the linked concepts of *moira* or fate, and time or reputation. *Moirai* is someone's share or portion of what life gives, but really implies fate or that which is inevitable. Aunt Mena, who had more than her share of misery, always said, "What are you going to do?" with a cosmic shrug. There is the companion concept of time, the share of gifts or prizes accorded someone, depending on their heroic deeds and commensurate with their set of obligations and risks taken. We can think here of the heroic stature of Achilles but also the idea of the *primo figlio* [*primogenito*, It.]. There is of course, the idea of *kleos*, glory or fame, but more literally "reputation," what people will say about you. Etymologically, *kleos* comes from the word for *call*, so inherent is what is said about one out loud. One of my grandmother's favorite rhetorical questions was, "Ma whadda the people gonna tink?" making it clear people thinking badly of us was not a risk we could take. Perhaps most important however, is the idea of *xenia*, in both Homer's world and in mine, which defines the absolute obligations on either side of the guest-host relationship. More specifically, the term defines coded responses to a stranger or a foreigner's arrival. Finally, in my family, there are the distinctly Homeric practices: the singing of songs and the telling of tales.

There were the stories about "the other side," (again, *nostos*), but there were also repeated oral cycles about set characters told with the

same refrains and phrasing. Their oral storytelling practices could easily have been studied by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, who would have found in Waterbury the same extemporaneous composing, using age-old narrative strategies of repetitious epithets and oral formulae. These stories reflected the values by which we lived, the values that were transmitted to my generation as they had been for centuries, explaining who was foolish or corrupt, and what constituted virtuous behavior. There were stories about the outsized behavior of men who contended with terrible and startling events. There were stories about scandalous and virtuous women.

Indeed, one of the main characteristics of a good woman in my family, almost as important as being a good cook and being utterly faithful, was her skills with thread and needle, a key measure by which the women in Homer are judged. Penelope could have sat at her loom on my grandmother's farm with ease, just as my grandmother had when she was a girl in her mother's home.

I mention in passing that one grandfather ran a large pig farm—remember that upon his return to Ithaca, Odysseus finds his first *xenia* with Eumaios, his loyal swineherd who sits “Odysseus down on brush and twigs he piled up for the visitor, flinging over these the skin of a baggy wild goat warm and soft, the swineherds own good bedding” (Book 14, lines 50–60), before “the stranger ate his meat and drank his wine ravenous, bolting it all down.” Eumaios says to Odysseus, “It's wrong my friend to send a stranger packing even one who arrives in worse shape than you. . . . Here I sit my heart aching for him, my master, my great king, fattening up his own hogs for other men to eat.” Fattening pigs, butchering and roasting them, were all a part of our everyday life. My other grandfather, indeed all the men on my father's side, including my uncles and my father, were blacksmiths, later ironworkers. In Book 10 of *The Iliad* we hear: “And the bellows . . . blew on the crucibles, breathing with all degrees of shooting, fiery heat, a blast for heavy work, a quick breath for the light, the pace of the work in hand all precisely gauged.” This same “fiery heat . . . the pace of work in hand, all precisely gauged,” along with the forge, the bellows, the anvil and hammers, were as much a part of our landscape as they were for Hephaestus, the smith who makes Achilles' new suit of armor before he finally enters battle with Hector.

So, to begin, let us drift into dreams. In Homer, dreams, augurs, omens, and prediction are part of the landscape. What they mean, who interprets them, and what they predict, are essential pieces of Homeric reality. So too were they for us. When we wandered into the kitchen of the ranch house my father had built for us in 1950 (from plans he had

cut from our newspaper, the *Waterbury Republican*), and we were still stupid from sleep, we plopped ourselves down on the green vinyl chairs at the white Formica and chrome-legged kitchen table, we typically started our day the same way: "I had this dream last night," or, "You'll never guess what I dreamed last night," or, "It was the darnedest thing last night."

And every day these introductions were interrupted by my mother turning away from her preparations, her face strung with the same worry, "Was it a good dream or a bad dream? If it was a bad dream have something to eat before you tell it. If you don't eat something your dream will come true." She stopped us before we could continue to speak. She said this every day and every day it had the same annoying, disruptive effect of breaking the mood of our still loose-limbed trances, that paranormal state between sleep and waking, between the unconscious and the conscious. Dreamscapes in my home were ones that were clearly between the lands of the spirit and the flesh. It was that site where you followed neither the rules of sleep nor wakefulness, the one you traveled from one place to the other. We reveled in the telling, but we wouldn't know what the dreams meant until we told our grandmother who had her own code of signs, augurs, and predictions.

My superficially Americanized mother's worries about our dreams were intense and real. Only food had the power to stave off the forces of the dream life. Dreams had the power to follow us into consciousness. By the time you ate a piece of bread or took a swig from the glass bottle of milk, the somnolent trance had been disturbed, and thus my mother's goal achieved. An interruption of the corporeal dampened these forces from the other cosmos. My mother lived, and so we lived in turn, in a universe where spirits walked at our side, where dying loved ones appeared at bedsides to say good-bye or to tell us good news, where dead baby brothers walked up the stairs calling out for Mama.

Then we always proceeded to tell our dreams. While the coffee was being poured from the percolator, the Sunshine 'Merican bread or Spinelli's Italian was being toasted, we took turns telling what had happened in our dreams. The wilderness of our dreams was brought into the kitchen: lions roared, we walked naked down streets, people chased us, or large dogs lunged for our jugular. We pleaded before authorities that didn't see we hadn't committed an offense. We were innocent and powerless. Or we flew, our arms were wings, we pumped ourselves up toward a sky as real and as meaningful to us as Penelope's eagle swooping down on her geese. Dreams were deeply embedded in our ordinary daily life. Although we had no official oracles or diviners for interpretation, my illiterate grandmother served as the diviner and interpreter,

having brought with her an ancient code of interpretation from Italy's deep South. Strong spirits, signs, and oracles, were all part of my grandmother's sphere, and so in turn, a part of ours.

Underlying all the unspoken assumptions in our kitchen was the idea that dreams portend and then reveal the truth, just as they do throughout Homer. To take a single important example from *The Odyssey*, there is the crucial moment between Penelope and Odysseus, after he has returned to his home disguised as a beggar and they finally sit together on either side of their hearth, the symbolic center of the household. Penelope tells him her recent dream in which an eagle swoops down and kills her geese. The geese represent her suitors. In the dream the eagle settles, then speaks to her in Odysseus's own voice. Odysseus, whose chair is drawn up near to hers, his identity still hidden beneath rags, responds like this: "Twist it however you like your dream can only mean one thing. Odysseus has told you himself—he'll make it come to pass. Destruction is clear for each and every suitor, not a soul escapes his death and doom" (Book 19). Although Penelope makes the disclaimer, "Ah my friend, dreams are hard to unravel, wayward and drifting things, not all we glimpse in them will come to pass . . ." (Book 19, lines 625–650), within a few lines she is essentially colluding with this beggar about the contest she's going to hold over the stringing of Homer's bow, which we all know only Odysseus can possibly string. It's in this crucial scene that Homer, the master storyteller, leaves us with the "does she or doesn't she know" question. This moment is one of the critical turning points of the story and the meaning of the dream is at its center. Dreams bring knowledge from beyond. My grandmother typically sat in an old worn upholstered chair next to the wood-burning stove telling us family dreams and interpreting what extraordinary messages they carried to us.

My grandmother's interpretations of all our dreams had the same mythic importance to us. Long after her own four daughters were married—my generation was already in college—my grandmother dreamed that a man had come and abducted one of her daughters. Sick with worry, she kept saying to herself, "No, no it's not true. I have all my daughters, all my children are safe." Still the dream haunted her. After a few days one of her daughters came to her profoundly upset. Her own daughter was pregnant and was going to be married immediately. This was in the very early 1960s when such news was still a horrifying breach of our sexual code. My grandmother's response was to start laughing with relief and pleasure. "Oh thank god. That's what my dream meant. I was so worried. "*Figlia mia*, it's okay. No one took her. It's just that she's going to be married." And she told her daughter her

dream. We have here another embedded Greek myth: the Persephone and Demeter story where sex and marriage are seen as the abduction of a daughter.

In Waterbury we told our dreams, we sat under grape arbors in the warm weather eating and drinking, singing and telling stories. Both grandfathers made cellars filled with innumerable barrels of wine each Fall so that the long tables so frequently filled with guests could be served abundantly throughout the entire year. In Homer too, a home without plenty of good wine and food to offer guests, either familiar or strange, was a home in shame.

My father loved to tell this story about the importance of wine to his family. His grandmother, his father, and his father's closest friend Canio stood solemnly in the cellar passing around the first taste of Canio's wine. They were the arbiters. The glass was passed in turn to each. No one said a word for a moment. Then Mamanonna, my father's grandmother, broke the silence grimly: "Canio's season is shot to hell." Poor Canio's wine wasn't any good and so now he had no way to welcome guests to his home.

In the south of Italy, a place of poverty, it was deemed essential that you conceal that meagerness and share abundantly what you had so little of. The poorer members of my family had to find a way to fulfill this duty even if it was a hardship because hospitality marked the essence of seeing ourselves as a civilized people.

Because after the fall of Troy Odysseus travels for ten years to return home, always in a perpetual state of *nostos*, one of the great concerns of this epic is *xenia* or hospitality. His journey is often defined by those who help or hinder his way home, those who violate the code of *xenia* and those who uphold it. *Xenia* is at the very heart of this epic. One could say it is the central value. Kalypso and Circe break this code by not helping Odysseus to get on with his journey.

The true horror of *xenia* being violated is made clear when we meet the Cyclops who not only does not extend proper hospitality but threatens instead to make his guests into dinner. This is to say, if you are so inhospitable as to not observe *xenia* properly, you turn into a creature who instead of feeding his guests, eats them. In *The Odyssey* good *xenia* is good character.

For us in our closed communities, these were the absolute rules: we were not sure if that which lay beyond our neighborhoods would welcome us, so the rules of hospitality required rigid certainty. If you were a stranger in the land (an immigrant), away from your own people, would you be welcomed or harmed? In fact, you could say *xenia* marked for us the essence of our morality. It is based more than anything on

obligation, rather than love or friendship. The host must more than welcome the guest or even the stranger. Family and friends herded strangers to our tables and our beds. If members of the family had to sleep on two chairs pushed together instead of a bed, and if children had to sleep on tables, then so be it. Hospitality determined our reputation as *custumade* (“with custom or courtesy”). To be *scustumade*, or without custom or courtesy, was shameful. If we took a walk to a neighbor’s house to ask about some incidental piece of information and they left us standing at the door and did not invite us in, the full force of my mother’s scorn rose in her, “They didn’t even invite us in. They didn’t even make us a cup of coffee.” Nothing could be more ill-mannered.

My grandmother was loath to leave her pig farm, especially on the very rare occasion when no one else was going to be home; she’d protest, “*Ma* [But] what if the people come and nobody è *ca* [is here]?” In my own household, there were many occasions when, although we had plans go out, when a Pontiac or Terraplane appeared with friends, relatives or *paesani*—they might only have driven from across town—our plans immediately changed. We might be, and often were, already in our car. Dad could be backing the car down our driveway, but guests had arrived at our door. Lucia and I would look at each other and sigh. We knew the car would be pulled back up the driveway. “Put the coffee on, Lucia. Jo, get the cold cuts and a jar of pickled eggplant from the cellar.” Later we’d bring the cookies in from the roasting pan where they were kept in the garage cupboards. We were going to be sitting on the porch, or at our kitchen table for the rest of the night, visiting and telling stories.

Lucia and I would roll our eyes at each other, but so embedded were these values in my family that we never dared to question this practice. My father and mother reassured our guests, “Come in, come in. No, no we weren’t really going anywhere. How nice to see you Uncle Dominic and Aunt Carmela,” even if we had just seen them the night before. “We weren’t going anywhere.” It was essential that you deny reality because, “You don’t want them to think we don’t want them in our house.” Lucia and I would never have dared display our sullen responses to our company. We would never have wanted to be seen as *scustumade*.

Telemachus, as Odysseus and Penelope’s son, like us, was the inheritor, and therefore the upholder of this code. In fact, in the first four books of *The Odyssey*, Telemachus, as both host and guest, displays the primacy of place that *xenia* holds in the Greek homeland. We are shown here a terrible violation of *xenia* by the suitors who have stayed too long, who are eating and drinking Penelope and Telemachus out of

house and home. This behavior is considered so terrible that if it is not at one with the suitors' plan to kill Telemachus, it does nonetheless signal a grievous violation of the Homeric ethic.

We first see Telemachus's moral fiber when Athena arrives at his door disguised as a guest, "Mortified that a guest might still be standing at the doors . . . he clasped her right hand and relieved her at once of her long bronze spear. . . . Greetings dear stranger. Here in our house you'll find a royal welcome. Have supper first then tell us what you need" (Book 1, lines 140–144). He escorts her to a high chair of honor, taking only a low chair for himself. Water is brought so that the disguised Athena might wash her hands before she is lavishly served. Only after all this has been attended to—and this is the key to *xenia*—does Telemachus ask his guest for a name and identity. The code of *xenia* rests on the fact that the host must be willing to take a guest into his household and take care of him before he has any idea of who he is.

Here is a parallel story that is part of my family's myth cycle. My mother often tells of the hordes who would visit her home when she was a child:

And I do mean hordes, these people would come up from New York and bring their friends and their friends' friends to stay with us or even sometimes live with us for the summer. It was their summer vacation and we were happy to have them. We'd wait on them hand and foot. This was our fun. To have company. People would come and live with us, with their children and everything. They'd take over our bedrooms and we'd sleep on the sun porch. We set out platters of my mother's home made *prosciutto* and sausage. We'd cook and clean for them.

Up the farm—whoever came there was always welcome. There were people who came to the door and asked for sandwiches. They were drifters. Once a big man came to the farm and he was Russian and he said, "Mama, can I have something to eat?" So my mother made him a sandwich and gave him something to drink, she looked down at his legs and they were a mess, full of sores and pus. So she had him take his shoes and socks off. Then she got down on her hands and knees and bathed his leg with disinfectant. This is a perfect stranger: she never asked his name! He never asked her for this and she got a basin and took off the old bandages and washed and cleaned his feet and legs and cleaned them and put ointment (a substance made up largely of oil) on them and wrapped them up

again. He was a big Russian guy, Big John. He had burned his feet with gasoline. I don't know how that happened, but my mother felt so sorry for him. When my father came home he said, "What are you doing?" She said, "He doesn't have any place to live. You have any work for him?" So my father asked the guy, "You want to work for me?" Big John called my mother "Mama" and us girls "Little Mama." He worked on the farm for a long, long time.

There are a couple of Homeric values encoded here. First, one welcomes a stranger, especially a stranger in need. One offers him food, drink, even the ancient value of bathing the stranger when the stranger enters your house, particularly his feet, since presumably he has been traveling and his feet are dirty and tired. Most importantly, one does not ask his name until these other needs have been attended to. This task is not beneath the woman of the house—in fact it enhances her status—to attend to these welcoming duties. She is the one who knows the value of welcoming the stranger. And although Big John was not given the comfort of a lustrous rug and mattress and settled under the eaves of the porch, as Odysseus is with Nausicaa's family, he is given a job and a bed and a place in my grandparents' household. He worked and lived in the little house for the men who worked on my grandfather's pig farm for a long time, ate all his meals at my grandmother's ample kitchen table, and there was certainly always wine with dinner.

If this narrative echoes, as it surely does, the Nausicca chapter filled with details of bathing and welcome, food and drink, the two details that especially caught my attention are the way my mother says casually, and only in passing, "She didn't even ask his name." This was so much a part of the fabric of the culture that she barely notices its importance. But Homer would have noticed.

My mother's tale parallels yet another Homeric story—and I assure you no one in my family ever read Homer until I did—the story of Odysseus's encounter with Euryclea, his childhood nurse and the family retainer. In Book 19, after Penelope and the beggar (Odysseus) have concluded their talk at the hearth, Penelope says, in line 364: "But come women, wash the stranger and make his bed, with bedding, blankets and lustrous spreads to keep him warm . . . then tomorrow at day-break bathe him well and rub him down with oil." Penelope is showing her superior virtue by offering even a beggar the finest *xenia* (notice the lustrous spread, beyond the bathing and bedding).

Because Penelope's maids are not virtuous—they have been consorting with the violating suitors—they now actually mock Odysseus



Grandma Becce and Uncle Rocky roasting a pig

instead, so Euryclea steps in to perform this righteous task. “The work is mine . . . wise Penelope bids me now and I am all too glad. I will wash your feet for both my own dear queen and for yourself.” At that point there is a foreshadowing of recognition. “You’re like Odysseus, to the life! Then she took up a burnished basin she used for washing feet and poured in bowls of fresh cold water before she stirred in hot.” And it is at that moment that in bathing his feet, just as my grandmother bathed and oiled the drifter Big John’s feet, before *she* knew his name, that Euryclea recognizes the beggar as her master. She started to bathe her master . . . then in a flash, she knew the scar. This beggar, this hero, is finally among his own people. This is the beginning of his stunning homecoming.

I often say jokingly about Homer: I know these people. When my grandmother washed and dressed the legs and feet of the drifter Big John in so similar a posture as Euryclea washing Odysseus’s feet, I would like to suggest that Homer would have recognized my grandmother and that is why I recognize in him the people whence I came.