Assess the significance of the Gods in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

It is the gods, not fate, who are concerned with the activities of human life in both the ">Odyssey<-" and the ">Iliad<-". The human action is so central that it quite absorbs the gods, as though they had no other responsibilities.

We get a sense of this divine participation from the very beginning of the " Iliad "Hera prompts Achilles to call the assembly (1.54); Athene checks his resolve to attack Agamemnon (1.188ff.); Zeus sends to Agamemnon a dream bidding him rally the Achaeans (2.16); Athene prompts Odysseus to prevent them from boarding the ships (2.182ff.); she silences the army to let him speak (2.281); Aphrodite drives Helen to Paris (3.420). Most notable throughout the poem is a hero's might increased by a god (4.439, 4.515, 5.1 -2, 5.122, 5.125, etc.).

In all these cases, the god achieves nothing supernatural but simply stimulates existing potentialities. It could not be otherwise. Human acts or states of being so stand out in their native quality that no external agency is allowed to affect their true nature. Yet a man's fierce resilience may be quite baffling and may suggest some unsuspected power. Human free-will is something natural an mysterious at the same time.

If the matter is seen in this light, it is pointless to inquire how far in Homer a man is responsible for his acts and how far he is influenced by the gods. Any intense moment of experience may seem imponderable. Whence comes a sudden excitement that gives us added strength? It certainly comes from a deep unsounded source in which we may feel a divine power. With equal pertinence Homer says, 'the spirit within him compelled him' or 'a god compelled him.' Initiative is not taken for granted; it does not come mechanically. A body's energy is no different in this respect. For instance, the two Ajaxes, touched by Poseidon, marvel at the way their feet and hands seem to yearn and move on their own account (13.73ff.).

Near the end of the <+">Iliad<-">, we find the best instance of gods participating in a human initiative (24.23ff.). Apollo pleads the cause of Hector on Olympus: his body must be saved from Achilles' indignities and returned to Troy. The gods agree. Zeus decides that Priam will go to Achilles with the ransom and that Achilles will accept. Is then the great scene between Achilles and Priam predetermined? We might say that it is the other way around: the human cry reaches heaven and incites the gods to action. In any case, neither Achilles nor Priam acts passively. Pent-up emotions find their way out and prompt the ransom. We have seen how Achilles is affected; as for Priam, he says to Hecuba, 'From Zeus an Olympian messenger came . . . and powerfully, within myself, my own spirit and might bid me go' (24.194ff.). The go ds do not weaken the human resolution but give it, rather, a greater resonance.

We may look in the same way at the so-called divine machinery. It has been observed that the action of the<+"> Iliad<-"> could be conceived even without any intervention of the gods. Others argue that nothing happens in the poem without the prompting of a god. The wrath of Achilles is explainable in its own right; and yet Apollo and Zeus come into the picture. Do we have a divine plan or

simply a human quarrel with dire consequences? Neither alternative can be exactly true. Achilles' wrath is momentous, and its import cannot be measured in ordinary human terms. Thus any sudden important happening spells bewilderment; it suggests a god. Human and divine power merge together.

Gods and men are interdependent. This view is confirmed by the way Homer paints the gods when they are left to themselves. For in their Olympian abodes (as in 1.571ff.) they pale into a desultory immortality. The Olympian scenes are the only ones in which anything frivolous takes place. It is from the human action that the gods draw their life-blood. By being so frequently associated with specific heroes, they themselves become human and even end up resembling their heroes. Apollo shares in the generous versatility of Hector, while Athene is associated with the prepossessing stateliness of Achilles and Diomedes. Such relations are no matter of course. What connects these pairs is actual contact, accessibility, recognition, and closeness. These immortals are more at home on earth than in heaven. Although they are far from being omniscient or omnipotent, they make up for any such deficiencies through their intense presence at crucial moments - as when Achilles, on the point of attacking Agamemnon, is checked by Athene:

And amazed was Achilles, / he turned, and instantly knew

the goddess Pallas Athena; / and dread was the light of her eyes. (1.199ff.)

The goddess stands out much more powerfully here than when, for example, she chides Aphrodite on Olympus (5.420ff.).

To be dramatically effective, a god must appear suddenly, as if from nowhere - often taking the shape of a friend or relative but always somehow recognisable. The anthromorphic appearance is tinged with personal appeal. We have a mysterious familiar image. The imponderable element in life's incidents thus finds a persuasive way of manifesting itself. It is no wonder that Homer, a lover of visual forms, gave the gods such prominence, leaving out as much as possible the shadowy idea of an all-encompassing fate.

The gods of the<+"> Iliad<-"> are thus characters in their own right. Of course, they draw their importance from popular cults and mythology, but essentially they play a dramatic part and thus help to imbue religion with the warmth of human emotions. Hector's Apollo is quite different from Chalcas's god of prophecy or from the local god of Chrysa, Killa, or Tenedos; the Athene of Achilles or Diomedes is quite different from the goddess of cities or from the patron of arts and crafts. No gods can play a major role in Homer unless they have a personal appeal and power. This condition tends to minimise or exclude those gods that are too particularly identified with a certain sphere of activity to take a generally appealing physiognomy. Poseidon is so closely identified with the sea, is ineffective in the battles of books 13 and 14. You might expect Ares to be an important god in a poem that deals with war; but, no, he has no personality, as his name is almost synonymous with war. Artemis remains in the backgr

ound. Demeter and Dionysus are almost absent. The sun god is only appealed to in oaths. Aphrodite is only important in relation to Helen. Zeus, Apollo, and Athene are quite different. Even quite apart from their actions in the Homeric poems, they were more persuasive and free: Zeus, father of gods and men, sky god, weather god; Apollo, the god of song and healing as well as prophecy; Athene, goddess of embattled cities as well as wisdom. Their broad range thus extends beyond any particular province and yet intensifies their personal

singularity. Even among the gods, individual forcefulness is proportionate to universal appeal. It is no wonder that in giving vent to some wild desire the characters often say, 'Would that it were, o father Zeus and Athene and Apollo' (2.371, 4.288, 7.132, 16.97).

Homer's treatment of the gods is no different from that of the human characters. Just as the characters are not idolised, the gods also are not worshipped with any mystical reverence or set aside in remote splendour. Apollo is nowhere more imposing than at Hector's side in book 15, Athene nowhere more powerful than with Diomedes in book 5. A clear, bright presence is a hallmark of the gods - and of everything else - in Homer. Action and function are all-important. The minor gods also appear with the same effect. Hermes guides Priam to Achilles. Hephaestus builds Achilles' shield. Iris bears the messages of Zeus. The Hours open the gates of Olympus. Themis calls the gods and serves at the divine banquet. Even these gods are removed from the shadowy background of popular cults or beliefs; they acquire clarity of outline on the strength of what they actually do.

What accounts for the special effectiveness of the Homeric gods is their participation in the everyday activities of life. Such action is far more characteristic of their personalities than their rare exhibitions of extraordinary power in rescuing a hero (3.380, 5.445, 20.325). They usually behave like men and women. They have, at least, the same passions, the same emotions. Yet they are immortal. Homer hardly dwells on their immortality, but the feeling is always there; a divine quality thence flows into actions shared by gods and men.

Divine quality? What kind of quality? What id the religious message of the ">Iliad<-"? There is certainly no providential design in the <+">Iliad<-">, no struggle for the transcendental cause. The Homeric gods have a different sphere. Their power lies in the immediate present. What we see is a divine immanence in things. What could be more repellent to common religious feeling than the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon revolving around a question of booty? And yet the deepest instincts are brought into action, passions and resolutions rise to full power; surely the crisis cannot be taken for granted; a god must lurk in these unleashed energies.

The gods watch, witness, participate, and help bring events to a crisis. Their movements are as free as human action is fluid in its ebb and flow. They are poetically conceived according to the needs of the moment, not subjected to any rule. We can find no theology here. Louder and stronger than any ritual prayers, we hear a cry prompted by the occasion - that of Glaucus (16.514ff.) or of Ajax (17.645ff.). The gods listen, and in most cases they respond. But let us not expect them to be just or fair (Athene tempts Pandarus in 4.92ff. and dupes Hector in 22.226ff.). Their strength lies in intensifying the sense of life, and yet in doing so they inevitably increase the poignance of what is at stake, including the issue of right and wrong.

All serious poetry of early Greece involves the gods. The presence of divine agents, visibly at work in what happens, enables the poet to show the meaning of events and the nature of the world. In the"> Iliad <-"we find a rich cast of gods and goddesses. Some take the side of the Achaeans, others that of Troy. There are lively disputes over the nectar on Olympus, as the divine partisans support and oppose their chosen mortals. Sometimes they go down - all save Zeus - and intervene personally on earth, on the battlefield or in private interviews. From moment to moment they seem unedifying: 'Homer makes his men gods and his gods men' comments a great critic in late antiquity, and he was thinking primarily

of the Iliad. Gods even suffer, and the shady pair Ares and Aphrodite, who are on the Trojan side and whom the poet seems not to like, are actually wounded by mortal warriors, while even Zeus grieves for the death of his son Sarpedon. Yet the suffering of gods is soon over and lacks the tragedy of that of men, and the phrase 'sublime frivolity' fits them well. For they can be, at moments, sublime as well as frivolous.

The ">Odyssey<-", too, has some scenes of the assembly of the gods, and Athene comes down constantly to intervene among men. But the divine cast-list is considerably less extensive, with a number of the great gods of the ">Iliad<-" barely appearing, such as Hera, Apollo, Artemis, and Hephaestos, and no more lively scenes of divine dissension. Poseidon does not want Odysseus to return home, and so the subject is simply not raised among the gods until a day comes when he is away (Book One); and when Odysseus says to Athene that he was not aware of any help from her on his perilous journey, she replies that she did not want to fight with Poseidon her uncle (13.316-19, 339-43). That was not the way of the gods of the" Iliad".

Fewer gods, then, appear, and they do not behave in the old turbulent manner. The frivolity of the gods, indeed, is now concentrated in the story which Demodocus sings to the pleasure-loving Phaeacians: a frankly saucy tale, this time, again with Ares and Aphrodite in an undignified role. As in the ">Iliad< -", these two are poet's butts. And even that spicy tale is a variation on the central theme of the"> Odyssey<-", a wife's chastity menaced in the absence of her husband. On earth that ends in tragedy, whether she yields like the guilty wife of Agamemnon or resists like the virtuous Penelope; in heaven there is temporary embarrassment, laughter, and the adulterous pair go off to their existence of splendour.

But the gods draw the same moral from this story as men draw from the destruction of the Suitors: 'Ill deeds come to no good' (8.329). Odysseus, when he kills the Suitors, spares the herald Meron with the words 'Fear not, Telemachus has saved your life, so that you may know in your heart, and tell other people, how good deeds are far better than evil-doing' (22.372-4).

Olympus is becoming, if not exactly respectable - we still hear a good deal of the irregular offspring of gods, a story-pattern which originally catered to the aristocratic pride of noble families - at least morally defensive and anxious to be justified. The first words we hear from Zeus in the poem are on this very theme. Meditating on Aegisthus, he breaks out

What a lamentable thing it is that men should blame the gods and regard" us "as the source of their troubles, when it is their own transgressions which bring them suffering that was not their destiny.

The Zeus of the ">Iliad<-" kept good and evil in jars in his house, and at his pleasure gave to some a mixture, to others evil unmixed (">Iliad<-"> 24.527-33); this sort of careful self-justification was by no means in his style. Care is taken in the"> Odyssey<-" to exculpate Odysseus from responsibility for the loss of his men. The Suitors, too, like Aegisthus, and like he crew of Odysseus, are warned before they are destroyed (2.161-9, 20.345-72). Justice, in the ">Odyssey, <-"is both done and seen to be done. Men suffer 'beyond their fate' by going out of their way to incur disasters. 'Fate' is of course, not to be thought of as a fully developed fatalism; it is more a matter of 'what was coming to them'.

Odysseus is repeatedly addressed as 'Zeus-born', ">diogenes.<-" Exactly how he descends from Zeus is not explained. In some sense Zeus is 'father of gods and men' (1.28, etc.), but he is father more particularly of kings and heroes, and in the case of Odysseus the epithet seems no more than a mark of regal and heroic rank. Poseidon is the father of the Cyclops, as he is father in myth of many other monsters felt as akin to the abysses of earth and sea. This particular connection, though, is probably an invention of the poet for the sake of his plot, which wants an angry sea-god.

The gods have supreme power, but they are not omnipotent. Omnipotence is of course not easy to reconcile with polytheism, as gods oppose each other. Men have free will and are responsible for their actions. Men have free will and are responsible for their actions. Athene can indeed put courage into a man's heart (3.76), or an idea: Odysseus would have been broken against the rocks, for instance, had not Athene put it into his mind to cling on to them (5.427). We even hear of a Suitor, the comparatively decent Amphinomus, when he has been warned by Odysseus to get out in time, taking serious thought:

he was filled with a foreboding of disaster. Not that it saved him from hid fate, for Athene had already marked him out to fall to a spear from Telemachus' hand. Meanwhile, he went back and sat down again on the chair he had just left.

Such a passage, striking as it is, does not possess the full theological implications which it might have in a Hebrew or Christian work, and painful questions of predestination and free will are not really raised. An important part of the meaning is that Amphinomus is a loser and will in fact be killed. Athene in classical art often carries in her outstretched hand a miniature figure of herself: that is Athene "Nike, "Athene Victory. Her favour means success, and it is no less true that to say that she favours Odysseus because he is a winner, than to say that he wins because of her favour. At times her interventions seem essentially otiose: Odysseus could well have thought of clinging to the rocks by himself, and indeed it is not clear that the poet means much more than that he had a sudden salutary thought. At other times she is a fully imagined person with likes and dislikes. An excellent example is the scene in Book Thirteen where she joins Odysseus on Ithaca. First she appears in disguise, and he tells her one of his usual false tales. The goddess smiles, strokes him with her hand, and assumes a different form: that of a handsome and accomplished woman. She tells him that lies are pointless with her, and that she loves him because, like her, he is intelligent and versatile; and the two of them sit together and plan the death of the Suitors (13.221-374). No male god is ever as close to a mortal as this. Their relationship is not sexual, but it has a special quality which goes with the difference of sex. Athene is more intimate with Telemachus than with anyone other than Odysseus - the connection is an hereditary one - but while she is thoughtful towards Penelope, sending her sweet sleep and comforting dreams (4.795ff, 16.603ff. etc.), she does not meet her, and their relationship has no intimacy.

The destruction of the Suitors involved the hand of Athene as well as that of Odysseus. That marks him as a great hero and victor, and also enables the people in the poem to say, with truth, that the gods do not permit behaviour like theirs. Odysseus himself says 'It was the doom of the gods which slew them, and their own wickedness' (22.413). Penelope at first ascribes the act to 'one of the immortals' indignation at their violence and evil-doing' (23.4). When old Laertes hears the news, his response is to cry 'By Father Zeus, you gods are still there on high Olympus if those Suitors have really paid the price for their outrageous

insolence!' (24.351-2). The Olympian gods may not look like the embodiment of pure virtue, but it is important to the

">Odyssey"> that they do respond to the inextinguishable cry of the human heart for justice.

It can be argued that the ">Odyssey<-" represents a moral advance on the

">Iliad<-" and that the Odyssean gods watch over the affairs of men with a more developed moral sense than their capricious Iliadic counterparts. In the opening of the poem Zeus gives the keynote speech which seems to put them on the side of justice. He rebukes men for blaming the gods for their misfortunes when it is only too apparent that they bring it upon themselves. Aegisthus is a case in point. The gods sent Hermes to warn that vengeance would come from Orestes if he usurped Agamemnon's throne. Later in the poem there is a divine presence of a kind not felt in the ">Iliad. ">When the companions of Odysseus have killed the cattle of the sun god, the forbidden flesh emits strange noises as it is being roasted. The mysterious light in the hall is attributed to a divine presence. Athene constantly guards the protagonist and appears to him in person to assure him of continued protection. Yet Zeus does not say that all suffering comes to men through wrongdoing, nor does he say that when they are punished they are punished by the gods. The gods have foresight and warn Aegisthus, but they do not compel Orestes to do what he does. The point of the speech is to put the moral responsibility for action firmly upon men. The companions of Odysseus and the suitors die, like Aegisthus, through their own folly. In the ">Iliad<-" the quarrel which leads to the catastrophe similarly results from the free action of Agamemnon and Achilles. The moments of supernatural mystery in the"Odyssey" are included primarily for poetic effect. The relationship between the goddess and the hero is based on the kind of personal affinity that underlies relations between men and gods in the"> Iliad">. It could well be argued that the ingredients are basically the same in the two poems but that they have been mixed differently to express a tragic vision in one, and to serve the interests of a poetic justice characteristic of comedy in the other.