



Thoreau's Reception of the *Iliad* in *Walden*

Freya Riebling

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This paper proposes a new reading of *Walden*, arguing that the *Iliad* shapes Thoreau's thought more profoundly than previous scholarship has recognized. Although Thoreau's lifelong immersion in Homer is well established in literary studies (Harding; Richardson), and scholars have shown that he uses antiquity to fashion a distinctive American literary identity (Buell 1973), Homeric influence on *Walden* has not been examined from an academic classicist's perspective in 75 years. Where earlier studies saw Thoreau's Homer as a fount of mystic sentiment, isolated borrowings, or vocabulary for Emersonian ideas (Harding; Peyser; Seybold), I argue that the *Iliad* informs *Walden* in substance as well as style—providing Thoreau with a framework for reconceiving daily life, the universe, and the discipline of Classics.

My argument has three parts. (1) The *Iliad* is the only book Thoreau brings to Walden Pond; and because he believes that it contains “the noblest recorded thoughts,” as he writes in *Walden*, the text provides a heroic conceptual grammar for his years in solitude there. (2) Because Thoreau refracts nature and solitude through a Homeric prism, he mythologizes everyday life. A confrontation between two ants is, in *Walden*, a miniature *Iliad*, complete with speeches, infantry, cavalry, and mock-heroic grandeur; a hale woodchopper exemplifies “simple Homeric health”; and as a beanfield becomes a battlefield for Thoreau against his weeds, mundane labors attain epic dignity. This heroic reading of nature restores wonder to a world demystified by industry and science—providing, I suggest, Thoreau's approach to the great philosophical problem of (post)modernity: the Death of God (Nietzsche) or the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber). (3) In *Walden*'s “Spring” chapter, Thoreau Homerizes not only everyday life, but the universe and everything in it. In striations of sand, he sees the workings of Homeric cosmology, κόσμος from χάος. From these archaic metaphysics Thoreau derives axioms of self-organization that define his ethics, his poetics and his politics. He calls the *Iliad* “the work of art nearest to life” because it is authorless and organically blends collective cultural experience, anticipating recent views of ancient mythopoesis (Nagy). Likewise, Thoreau incubates at Walden Pond the Homeric idea that the polis, like the cosmos, organizes itself (αὐτοποίησις). What is true of peoples is true of persons: Each of us must order our own priorities and values—a metaethics that justifies civil disobedience to externally imposed moral codes.

The paper concludes by tracing the implications for Classics itself. In treating the *Iliad* not as fixed canon but as living material for personal refashioning, *Walden* offers an alternative model for the study of antiquity. To be classic, for Thoreau, is not to be fixed and static, but eternally open to appropriation. As each new reader of the *Iliad* self-organizes the text into a system for an evolving purpose, the founding text of the Western tradition subverts and reinvents the West and tradition. In this way the ancient world, like nature itself, sprouts “fresh curls” of meaning with each successive season.