



The Desert's Ancient Peace: CHRISTENDOM FROM HOMER TO ELIOT

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock
If there were the sound of water
only
Not the cicada
And dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the
pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop
But there is no water

— T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

There is an ancient human longing, as deep as time itself, as deep as every mortal heart, for the good that men call peace. This longing has roots as deep as the mystery of the cherubim and the flaming sword preventing man's return to the primordial Garden from which he was exiled after the Fall. In modern times peace has sometimes gotten a bad name, where peacenik rhymes with beatnik, tokens of *The Purple Decades* of the 1960s and '70s, often marked by anti-war movements of hippies holding up two fingers in a V sign which paradoxically also represents victory in war. They certainly had it right that war is the opposite of peace, and *War and Peace* is Tolstoy's title for his greatest novel built upon a dichotomy as ancient as Good and Evil. But is all war evil, and is all peace good? The ancient Greek philosophers understood that the answer to any question must begin with the definitions of the terms involved. For what is war after all, and what is peace?

The Western literary tradition begins with Homer's *Iliad*, arguably the greatest poem ever written about human warfare. In it, two ancient cities are pitted against one

another in a war stemming from causes of deepest myth, where Eris, the god of Strife, hurls a golden apple from the Hesperides inscribed with the words "To the Fairest", where Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite are present. They quarrel over who should receive the apple. The mortal Trojan Paris is chosen to decide, and he chooses Aphrodite, who promises him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Sparta, where it is understood that the better choice would have been Athena, who promises wisdom, or Hera, who promises political power. War between Greece and Troy ensues, with Achilles pitted against Hector in the ultimate battle. Achilles is the greater warrior since he alone can strike terror into every heart. Paradoxically, what most fills his opponents with fear is not his spear, but his shield, forged by Hephaestus, whom the Romans called Vulcan. On his shield is depicted the deepest mysteries of man, as understood by the earliest Greeks, whose world view was in many ways the darkest in the history of Europe. Homer begins his description of the shield of Achilles by first describing the whole world encompassed by the heavens:

Then first he form'd the immense and
solid shield;
Rich various artifice emblazed the
field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle
bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy
round;
Five ample plates the broad expanse
compose,
And godlike labours on the surface
rose.
There shone the image of the
master-mind:
There earth, there heaven, there ocean
he design'd;

The unwearied sun, the moon
completely round;
The starry lights that heaven's high
convex crown'd;¹

Homer next describes two cities, whose mystery runs deeper than Greece or Troy, encompassing all humanity, in his Bronze Age world vision:

Two cities radiant on the shield appear,
The image one of peace, and one of
war.
Here sacred pomp and genial feast d
light,
And solemn dance, and hymeneal rite;
Along the street the new-made brides
are led,
With torches flaming, to the nuptial
bed:
The youthful dancers in a circle bound
To the soft flute, and cithern's silver
sound:
Through the fair streets the matrons in
a row
Stand in their porches, and enjoy the
show. . . .
Another part (a prospect differing far)
Glow'd with refulgent arms, and ho
rid war.
Two mighty hosts a leaguer'd town
embrace,
And one would pillage, one would
burn the place.
Meantime the townsmen, arm'd with
silent care,
A secret ambush on the foe prepare:
Their wives, their children, and the
watchful band
Of trembling parents, on the turrets
stand.
They march; by Pallas and by Mars
made bold:
Gold were the gods, their radiant
garments gold,

And gold their armour: these the
squadron led. . . .

These depictions of two cities of war and peace, reflecting the strife among the gods of Olympus, are followed by a pastoral scene which some critics see as the darkest element of the shield, where the description of the field on Achilles shield would have struck greatest terror into his enemies:

A field deep furrow'd next the god
design'd,
The third time labour'd by the
sweating hind;
The shining shares full many plough-
men guide,
And turn their crooked yokes on every
side.
Still as at either end they wheel around,
The master meets them with his goblet
crown'd;
The hearty draught rewards, renews
their toil,
Then back the turning ploughshares
cleave the soil. . . .

The ploughman, depicted in this eternal divine work of art, ploughs his field forever going back and forth in endless repetition, mirroring the endless recurrence of war and peace in the human realm. Here we can recall Keats' comment on the ancient Grecian urn:

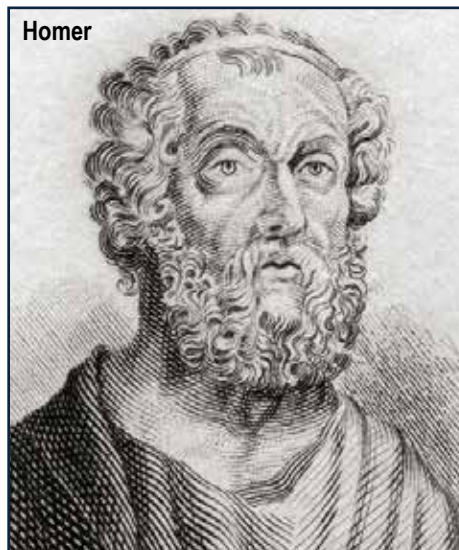
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out
of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

In Homer's lines about the ploughman's field, we find a description of what Nietzsche would later call the *Eternal Return*. Homer's darkest comment on the theme of war and peace is that they recur forever *ad nauseam*. Homer, whom many still regard as the greatest poet of all time, and certainly the greatest poet of the Bronze Age, stared headlong into an abyss of a never-ending cycle of war and peace for as long as man shall be. What made Achilles great in Homer's vision was his absolute resolute embrace of this eternal condition. This is what most struck terror into his enemies.

Nietzsche's philosophy, rooted in Zoroastrian myth, but echoing Homer's deeper vision, emblazoned the concept of the Superman, who could embrace the Eternal Return. Nietzsche describes it as follows:

The heaviest burden: "What, if some

day or night, a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh . . . must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again—and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine!' If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "do you want this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?



Homer spoke of two cities of war and peace, but he also spoke of pastoral settings, which in his view mirrored the two cities on Achilles' eternal shield, forever preserved in his poetry. The deepest mystery of Achilles' shield was in fact a message which Christianity would recognize as despair, whose depths are fathomless. Yet

only a divine being could embrace such futility, for though Achilles' father was a mortal, his mother was a goddess. Achilles was fated to die, but only after waging war like no man could. It is no wonder that Nietzsche died insane, for he was no Achilles. Unlike Nietzsche, Homer never strove to become like the Bronze-Age gods but only admired them from a distance as he sang their praise in Europe's most ancient music.

Yet many poetic traditions portray the countryside in a more idyllic way. We think of Yeats's lines:

I will arise and go now, and go to
Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay
and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a
hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for
peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the
morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and
noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

These lines are an echo of Wordsworth, surely the greatest poet of Nature there has ever been in the history of human poetry, whose works were reflected in the nineteenth-century American poets, most notably William Cullen Bryant, dubbed "The American Wordsworth".

But beyond man's cities lie the fields, and beyond the fields the woods, but beyond the woods in the Western sunset are to be found the deserts of swirling sands forever preserved in the Bible. In the Book of Exodus man learns the true meaning of the desert, a place more mysterious than the poetry of Homer, Nietzsche, or even Wordsworth. For the desert is the most ancient paradox, the ultimate place of death, where alone can life be found. For the desert is beyond all gardens and fields of springs or harvests, a place where no natural sustenance can be found. It is the place where grasping man can no longer depend on man for survival, but only on God, who alone rains Manna from the skies of deepest mystery. It is the place literally "outside the house", *para oikia* in the Greek, from which we get the word *parish*. For the church of God, in the modern urban wilderness, is the one place the voice of God is heard, where the only Word of God is the paradox of Peace.

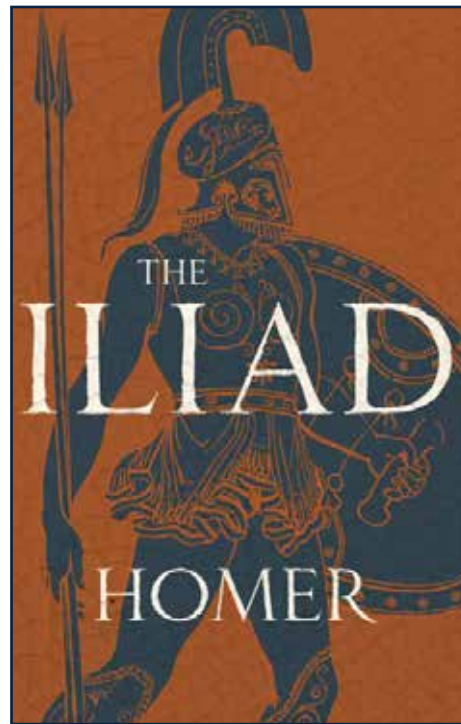
Which brings us full circle, like the rings surrounding Achilles' ancient shield, to the ancient questions of what is war, and what is peace. Homer could not truly answer these questions, but the Greek philosophers who followed him understood that we must always begin with definitions. Across the endless expanse of the Western tradition, where can we find a true definition of peace? For only by understanding peace can we understand its opposite of war.

In the Catholic Tradition St. Augustine is held in highest honor as the greatest of the Church Fathers. He also wrote about two cities in his *magnum opus*, *The City of God*. Like a prophet of old, he told us the deepest meaning of the two cities of war and peace, which he calls the cities of man and God. He tells us that the war and peace of political realms are only reflections of the deeper condition of the human heart itself, created *imago Dei*, in the image of God endowed with mind and will, capable of knowing what is True, and of willing Good. But unlike God, after the Fall man is also capable of choosing evil. Augustine was inspired to write his work upon witnessing the fall of the Roman Empire, which to his contemporaries was the most world-shattering political event ever known, where the very sky was seen to fall. But he understood the endless waves on the ancient seashore, where the ocean mirrors the sky, where the angel had spoken to him about the Trinity, where the waves are ever repeating, like Homer's fields of grains waved in winds of time, wave after wave forever, where the music of the desert is eternal. The two cities, as Augustine saw, are in fact two conditions of war and peace based on two loves of every human heart, the love of self to the point of contempt of God, and the love of God above all things. We all learn from childhood that love of self in the form of "selfishness", is somehow wrong. And yet we are informed by Catholic theology that love of self was the highest love before the Fall of Adam. Which is yet another paradox. For to love is to will the good for another, and the greatest good is God. But to will this greatest good for another one must first will this good for oneself. Atheists who do "works of charity" can never have charity in the truest sense, since they cannot will the greatest good for their fellow man since they cannot will it for themselves.

To answer the question of what is peace the Greeks again remind us that everything begins with the question of definition. Augustine tells us that to understand peace we

must first understand the Fall. But what was the Fall? Augustine supplies the answer, as recorded in the *Catechism*, when he tells us that the Fall was nothing other than the "Loss of Original Justice". But what then is justice?

In the ancient world there was more than one concept of justice. The most immediately recognizable one is the one we live by whenever we go to a store, when we give something of equal value in exchange for what we take, where justice involves equality, which modern Democratic man can readily understand. But Plato and St. Paul spoke of another form of justice in terms of a "hierarchy of order". Which leads us to yet another question of what is order. From Aristotle we learn that order is simply a "before and after". Shakespeare



included these same words as part of his definition of human reason when he wrote in the voice of Hamlet:

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking *before and after*, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused. . . .

Among the various orders that reason recognizes there is first the order of place in which one domino is before another in a line of falling dominoes, or of time rooted in the order of place where one hour is before the next hour, whose more minute division is the minute before each passing

minute, with a simple change of pronunciation, where the rising sun at dawn is before the noon and setting sun in its apparent orbit around the earth, where the earth makes its elliptical orbit around the sun while the sun makes its 230 million year orbit around the center of the Milky Way in its own galactic year, where it is scheduled to burn out in five billion years from now. Or as Shakespeare put it:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end. . . .

There is also the order of learning, in which we learn to count before we learn algebra, or letters before poems. There is the order of being in which the line is before the triangle, or the parent before the child. But there is also the order of nobility, in which the lower is subordinate to what is higher, where the king is before the page, or God before creation. And this is the order involved in Plato's and St. Paul's understanding of justice, and the key to unlocking the deepest mystery of the Fall. For the English word justice is derived from the Latin word *iustitia*, which is in turn derived from the Latin word *ius*, which we translate as "right" in a truly English word with Germanic roots. For a man is said to be upright when he is well-ordered.

For original justice is the order in which God first created the world, in which the lower was subordinated to what is higher in the hierarchy of being, where hierarchy is rooted in the Greek words meaning "sacred order" (which is why the sacrament of Holy Orders is so called, since it places a man within the sacred order or hierarchy of Christ's priesthood). The material realm was made subject to Adam, the nexus of spirit and matter, and Adam to God. Adam's body with its senses and sense emotions was subject to his higher faculties of mind and will, which were in turn subject to God, who is Truth and Goodness itself. When Adam fell to the temptation to become like God there was the reversal of this primordial order in the tragic disordering of Original Sin. Adam rebelled against God in his highest faculties, created *imago Dei* with mind and will, and as punishment his body rebelled against his spirit, and he became enslaved to the material realm. The Word of God then became man to restore the original order of creation when he gave us three Evangelical Councils which we are all called to live by in spirit, if not by

vow. For by obedience man's mind and will are once again made subject to God. By chastity man's sense appetite is made subject to his spiritual faculties of reason and will. And by poverty he is freed from his enslavement to mere matter, the dust of earth. The three Evangelical Councils correspond to yet another trinity in the Catholic tradition of Faith, Hope, and Charity, where Faith corresponds to obedience, Hope to poverty, and Charity to chastity. For three rings surrounded Achilles' shield, forged by Hephaestus in Homer's divinely inspired music. The ancient symbols of the Holy Roman Empire, still found in Catholic churches throughout the world, enshrine this order, where a sphere, representing the earth, is surmounted by a cross, which in turn surmounted by a blue gem, which represents the beatific vision, which the world attains through submission to the Cross of Christ.

In *The City of God* St. Augustine finally reveals to us the definition of peace. He defines it as *tranquillitas ordinis*, the "tranquility of order", where order means the original order of creation before the Fall, the condition which God originally intended for all mankind. After the Fall, this order and its ensuing peace can only be found in the desert, beyond the cherubim sword, where the Manna forever falls from Heaven until the end of time.

War is the opposite of peace. But is all war evil, and is all peace good? Even before Homer there was Hesiod, who begins his *Theogony*, the first work of the Western Canon, with the line: "First there was Chaos." The *Book of Genesis* also tells us that in the beginning the earth was "void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep". Chaos and war are opposed to order, light, and peace. God creates by bringing into being out of non-being, where every creature participates in God's being in a hierarchical order from the dust of Adam to the highest angel, and sin is always a falling away from the fullness of being to which God calls us out of the depths of His eternity. Adam's war against God in the Garden was certainly evil, but St. John the Baptist's war against this primordial disorder was not, when he became the voice of God crying out in the wilderness of the desert, announcing the supreme reversal of the Christ. For as Christ said: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent shall bear it away." John the Baptist's war against our disordered world was the

disruption of its disorder for the sake of the restoration of the original order of man's creation, where what is lower is subordinated to what is higher, matter to spirit, and man to God. For John the Baptist was a just man. And his message from the ancient desert was the true message of peace, where he did not hold up two fingers in a false V sign, but a locust whose whirl of wings were like the blur of flashing swords in sunlight's rays of the primordial dawn, "when the morning stars sang together,



and the angels shouted for joy". For his message was the heralding of Christ, the Eternal Word made flesh, which God spoke in the desert of the cosmos longing for its creator.

St. Thomas tells us that all of creation is a reflection of the Holy Trinity. The Word spoken in the Desert proceeds from the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both, which in the visible mission became the tongues of flame. All creation proceeds from the Trinity, to which all creation returns, for as St. Paul tells us, "all things are from Him and to Him". T. S. Eliot, at the end of his *Four Quartets*, describes how the mystery of the ancient Garden will at the end of time be restored and revealed in its deepest source, where the key to the gate of the Garden is given to us by Christ, where the Holy Spirit of Peace is breathed upon the primordial waters of creation, wave after wave of fields like the "wine-dark" waves of Homer's seas:

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered
gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea . . .
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are
in-folded
In to the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

As God the Son proceeds from God the Father, and the Holy Spirit from both in the eternal processions of the Trinity, all creation proceeds from the Trinity, to which all creation returns when the visible missions of the Son, who is the Word made flesh, and the Holy Spirit whom he sends as the Paraclete, have been accomplished, when "the tongues of flame are in-folded" at the end of time. Our Lord the Christ once said: "In this world you will have many troubles, but have confidence, for I have overcome this world." Every time we go to Mass in our own parishes, we again enter the ancient desert where the true Manna falls from Heaven, in the form of the Holy Eucharist, where we are reminded of His eternal words: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. . . ."

William Dunn converted to Catholicism while a student at Thomas Aquinas College in California and received degrees in theology in Austria. He resides in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he teaches classes in philosophy, theology, and literature and enjoys writing poetry.

References

1. This and the following passages from the *Iliad* are from the translation of Alexander Pope, first published, by subscription, in six parts between 1715 and 1720. Homer's description of Achilles' shield occurs in Book 18, lines 478–608 of the *Iliad*, and is the first example of *ekphrasis* in Western literature. Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is another famous example of this rhetorical device, which is the verbal description of a visual work of art.